

# Tikkun

SPRING/SUMMER

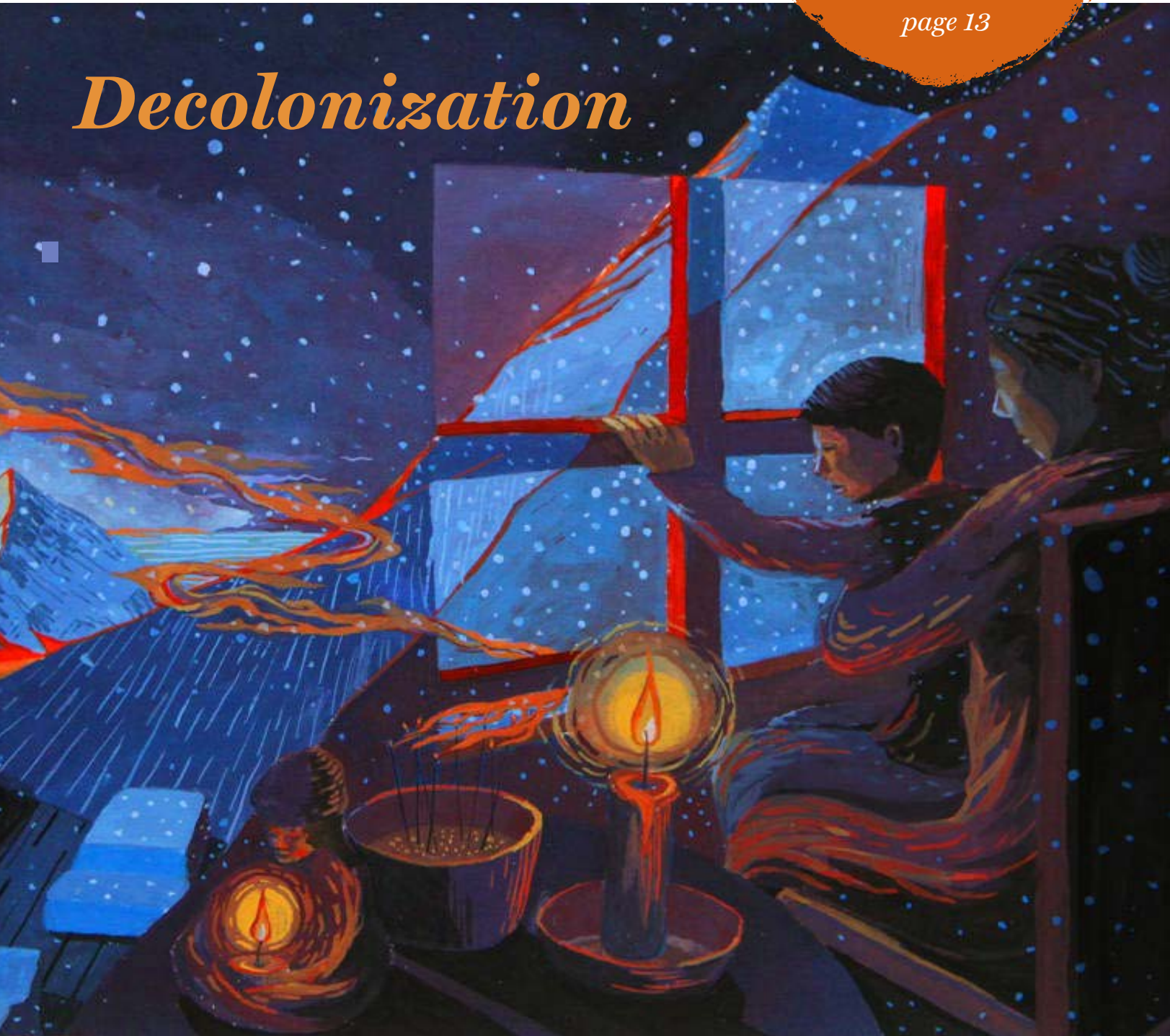
POLITICS • SPIRITUALITY • CULTURE

A Jewish and Interfaith Prophetic Voice to Heal and Transform the World

A CRY  
FROM THE  
HEART

page 13

## *Decolonization*



Tale of the Modern Refugee | Speaking for the Silenced | Democrats on a Self-Destructive Path

The Braille of a Restless Lake | Decolonization of Black Cinema | Don't Flush Peace Down the Toilet

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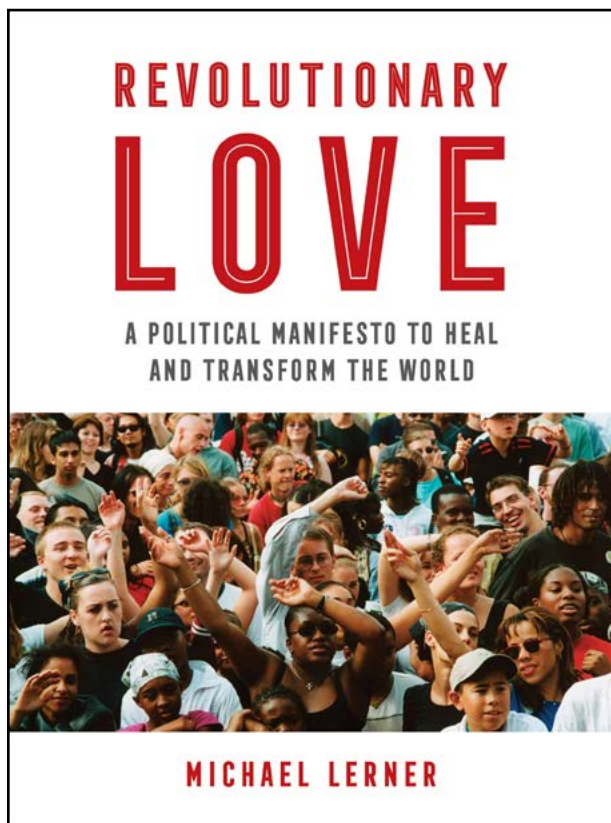
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Rabbi Lerner's new book will be published Oct.15 but please order it now!



From the social theorist and psychotherapist Rabbi Michael Lerner comes a strategy for a new socialism built on love, kindness, and compassion for each other. *Revolutionary Love* proposes a method to replace what Lerner terms the capitalist globalization of selfishness with a globalization of generosity, prophetic empathy, and environmental sanity.

Liberals and progressives need coherent alternatives to capitalism, but previous visions of socialism do not address the yearning for anything beyond material benefits. Inspired by Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Simone de Beauvoir, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Carol Gilligan, *Revolutionary Love* offers a strategy to create “the Caring Society.” Lerner details how a civilization infused with love could put an end to global poverty, homelessness, and hunger, while democratizing the economy, shifting to a 28-hour work week, and saving the life-support system of Earth. Let us develop the courage to stop listening to those who tell us it’s all “unrealistic.”

You can pre-order it at your local bookstore or on [Amazon](#).

## Endorsed by:

“Michael Lerner takes the universal qualities wrongly diminished as ‘feminine’—caring, kindness, empathy, love—and dares to make them guides to a new kind of politics that can challenge the cruelty, competition, and dominance wrongly elevated as ‘masculine.’ *Revolutionary Love* opens our minds and hearts to a fully human way of living and governing.”

—Gloria Steinem, feminist activist, and author of *My Life on the Road*

“The caring society is the only realistic path for humanity to survive, and in *Revolutionary Love* Rabbi Lerner lays out a powerful and compassionate plan for building that caring society. I love this book. Please read it and join with others to build the movement that can enable these ideas to reshape our society that so badly needs this vision.”

—Keith Ellison, Attorney-General of the State of Minnesota

“What is post-socialism? Can we conceive of a society that is actually based on community and love? Michael Lerner can. Anyone wanting to overhaul the inequities and mean-spiritedness of our social system should read this book—and incorporate its message into the array of social-change movements. Going beyond the narrow confines of what we are resisting, this book not only puts forward a positive vision, drawing much from the wisdom of feminists and peace activists, but provides a coherent strategy for how to get there. It liberates readers to go beyond the ‘be realistic’ command of our ruling elites and to embrace the beautiful and love-filled world that Michael Lerner proposes.”

—Medea Benjamin, cofounder of Code Pink

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“I Remember Happiness” by Jess X. Snow. Gouache on Paper. Based on an essay by Ocean Vuong of the same name published in *Guernica*.

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Articles in Tikkun do not necessarily reflect Tikkun's position on any issue.

Tikkun's positions are presented in our editorials. To submit a manuscript, visit <https://www.tikkun.org/submission-guidelines>.

# Readers Respond

Brenda Peterson is a blessing to our world. In her essay “Animal Allies: Healing and Empowering Children” (Winter 2019 issue), she demonstrates her ability to shapeshift herself into the mind of young people who are filled with heroes signed, sealed, and delivered in movies and video games. These fictional super-beings have nothing to do with the natural world. Peterson has found a way to tap into the imaginal world of youngsters and help them drill down past those digital heroes in order to find true allies who are our natural partners in vanquishing the destruction of the earth and therefore ourselves. She is a master weaver in helping her students make whole the tapestry of their lives, guiding them to find their inner animal collaborators and fierce partners in their life’s journey. She’s found a way to assist city-dwelling youth, who have never been in a forest or swam in a natural river, to feel their own oneness with wild nature. It is a gift to us all.

Justine Willis Toms  
Cofounder, Host New Dimensions Radio  
Author, *Small Pleasures: Finding Grace in a Chaotic World*

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I was honored that Martha Sonnenberg included “As We Bless” in her creative and insightful piece on “Kabbalah and Healthcare Transformation” (Summer 2018). I thought your readers might be interested to know that the version of the chant she used is actually an adaptation.

Like the version Sonnenberg uses, the original begins and ends with “As we bless the Source of Life, so we are blessed...”

This was intended as an action statement. It is both a reflection of the Wiccan notion that the energy we put out into the world comes back to us, and also an interpretation of “I’hitpallel”—“to pray”—which, in Hebrew, is in the very specific form of a reflexive verb. (For those who aren’t grammar geeks, reflexive verbs indicate that an action is committed and received by the same person or entity; the actor is also the subject of the action.)

## A NOTE ON LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We welcome your responses to our articles. Send letters to the editor to [letters@tikkun.org](mailto:letters@tikkun.org). Please remember, however, not to attribute to *Tikkun* views other than those expressed in our editorials. We email, post, and print many articles with which we have strong disagreements because that is what makes *Tikkun* a location for a true diversity of ideas. *Tikkun* reserves the right to edit your letters to fit available space in the magazine.

“As We Bless” is also written as an affirmation of the power that comes from joining together in this action, so it is “we” and “our,” not “I” and “my.”

In the original (which was inspired by a *davenning* activity at a B’not Esh retreat), the rest of the chant is an expansion of these concepts. It emphasizes the “doing” (As we *ble*ss). **Blessing is a verb. It is singular:** “And the blessing gives us strength...” (as if it said “And the act of blessing gives us strength...”).

In the decades since I composed this chant, others experienced its message differently, contemplating the outcomes more than the action, attending to the “so we are blessed” part of the opening line rather than the “As we bless” part. Repeating what they thought they heard, they began singing something slightly different.

Blessing became a plural noun: “And the (or our) blessings give us strength...”

In some versions (though not the one Sonnenberg includes) “visions” became singular— focused on having a clear view of the now and the strength, courage, and calm to deal with what we see around us. This is in contrast to the plural original, which is a nod to our hopes for the future and the courage to make them real.

Over the years I have been moved by the adaptations, so different than my initial *kavannah*, but equally meaningful. I’m humbled that the chant has continued to be relevant (even after 25 years!) and am happy to have people use whichever version speaks truth to them. If you’re using an adaptation, you also might want to occasionally “try on” the original and see how it feels.

Faith Rogow

## MORE LETTERS

We receive many more letters than we can print! Visit [tikkun.org/letters](http://tikkun.org/letters) to read more.



Trump rallying community in Youngstown, Ohio.  
Image courtesy of the White House/Wikimedia.

# Democrats on a Self-Destructive Path

RABBI MICHAEL LERNER

**T**HERE ARE TWO GREAT DANGERS FACING OUR WORLD TODAY: (A) nuclear war (as the Trump administration continues its threats to Iran and simultaneously imposes harsh tariffs on China, possibly setting us up for military steps sometime before the 2020 election); and (B) accelerating destruction of the life support system of planet Earth.

There are three additional great dangers facing the U.S. today:

1. Increasing disparity of wealth between the top 10% of wealth holders/income earners and the rest of us, with its attendant consequences of inadequate or unaffordable health care and pharmaceuticals, oppressive debt (particularly from student loans to afford an education and pay-day loan sharks), and fears of financial destitution from unemployment caused by capital flight.



2. Violence against the most vulnerable as police, hate groups, white nationalists, and branches of the Trump-dominated U.S. government intensify their assaults (sometimes by overt action, sometimes by eliminating programs designed to alleviate suffering) on refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers, African Americans, Native Americans, Muslims, Jews, gays, lesbians, the transgender community, senior citizens, and women (most recently by criminalizing abortion, a growing movement spurred on by Christian Evangelicals).
3. The psycho-spiritual distortions in human relationships caused by the globalization of selfishness, a.k.a. capitalism, as it is brought home daily (reinforced by mass media presentations of human beings as seeking domination over others rather than caring communities), causing people to be less trusting of each other and hence increasingly unmoored from the love and respect that we all need to flourish, and manifesting in increasing levels of addictions (from alcohol and drugs to social media), suicides, depression, and an opioid/fentanyl epidemic.

Now wouldn't you think that these urgent challenges would give Democrats a way to speak to the real needs of people? Yet Congressional Dems have missed the mark.

Instead, Democrats continue to be chewing the bone of Trump's financial mismanagement, lies, and his attempts to stop or mislead those investigating him. No doubt there are possible impeachable offenses. But this is simply playing

to the Democrats' base, not widening it. And at the time this issue of *Tikkun* is published, the national leadership of the Democratic Party has refused to hold a debate dedicated to exploring differences about how best to deal with the environmental crisis, but have allegedly also threatened to keep out of future presidential candidate debates anyone who does participate in such a forum organized outside the Democratic Party. In the first Democratic Party presidential debates stretching over two nights and close to four hours, a total of 15 minutes were given to the environmental crisis. And zero time to the psycho-spiritual distortions in human relationships caused by the globalization of selfishness, a.k.a. capitalism, as it is brought home daily from the competitive marketplace.

“Now wouldn't you think that these urgent challenges would give Democrats a way to speak to the real needs of people? Yet Congressional Dems have missed the mark.”

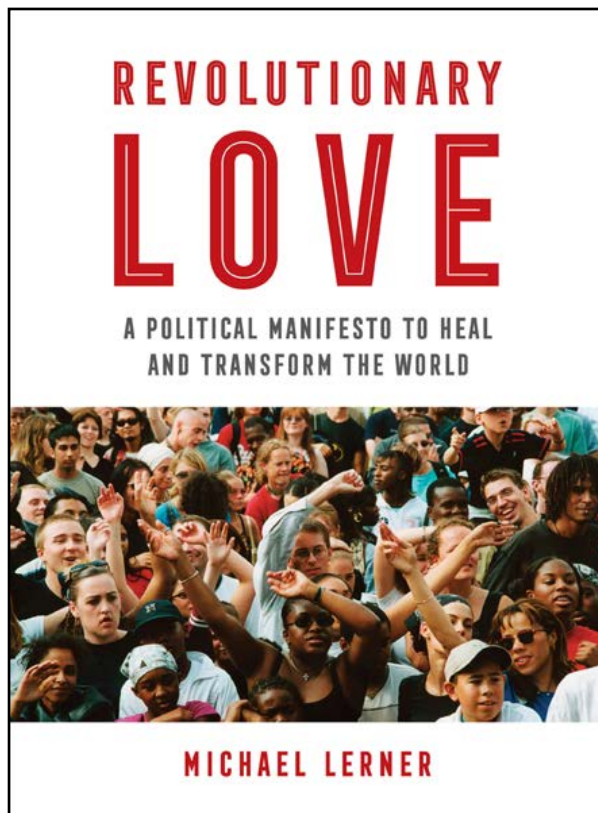
In May of 2019, the *New York Times* did an investigative piece, “[There's No Boom in Youngstown, but Blue-Collar Workers Are Sticking with Trump](#),” on a heavily working-class district that had been a traditional Democratic Party stronghold in Ohio but had switched to support Trump in 2016. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of people there are still supporting Trump. Interviewees made clear that they didn't care about Trump's rudeness, his financial affairs, his sexual affairs, his lies, or his help from Russia in winning the presidency. What interested them

was that he was presenting himself as caring about them and their lives. All the rest is just dismissed as “politics as usual.” They saw nothing that the Congressional Democrats were doing with their investigations and endless revelations about Trump’s scandals as having any relevance to their lives.

The Democrats must know that if they actually found more smoking guns than those already revealed they could impeach Trump, but the Senate would never even take up the issue and certainly never throw him out of office. And if they did, Mike Pence would win tremendous sympathy and as President would be even a more dangerous extremist because he is more clever yet perceived by the media as more moderate.

Congressional Democrats, however, have another option. They can adopt the following strategy:

1. Insist that mass media give daily coverage on primetime news to the destruction of the environment just as it once did to the daily news of our calamitous war in Vietnam.
2. Put forward a set of positive ideas and programs—some of which can be drawn from ideas developed at *Tikkun* and the [Network of Spiritual Progressives](#) over the past 32 years, from the Green New Deal, from the [Poor People’s Campaign Moral Budget](#) and from my new book *Revolutionary Love: A Political Manifesto to Heal and Transform the World* (to be published in October by the University of California Press). These ideas and programs address the five areas I discussed at the beginning of this article.
3. Divide Democratic Congressional representatives into teams of five and hold community meetings in every congressional district in the country and present their ideas, drawn from point 2 above, at these



gatherings. (Each group of five would go to several different congressional districts until each congressional district has been visited by one of these groups.) After these Congressional Representatives present their ideas, they would then have attendees break into groups of five, where they will discuss and debate the ideas about how to address the five key issue areas presented and develop their own solutions. Those solutions can then be shared both in written and verbal forms at the meeting. The written notes will be shared with the rest of the Democrats in Congress. The small group discussions would be videotaped and then put on a website so that people around the U.S. could hear what their fellow citizens were thinking. One key component of this process is for the congressional members to *actually* listen carefully to what the people share and engage with their concerns, ideas, and responses. Typically, congress members tend to respond to concerns and questions with standard

answers without actually engaging with the questions or concerns raised. This process needs to be one where Democrats actually listen and reflect back, helping to ensure that the participants have a sense of being heard. Listening in this way is a powerful demonstration of respect. The “prophetic empathy” needed to make this a success is precisely what Cat Zavis teaches in her trainings ([www.spiritualprogressives.org/training](http://www.spiritualprogressives.org/training)).

Many Congressional progressives would likely get behind some version of this strategy. But they are not the majority in the Democratic Party caucus in the House of Representatives and hence this strategy would likely be rejected by the establishment-elite-friendly majority even in the Democratic-dominated House.

Yet even considering their own narrow interests, the path establishment-oriented Democrats have been following, namely, placing their major energies into trying to find a way to impeach Trump, focusing on his stupidity, racism, personal immorality, and demonstrating how Russian interference in the 2016 election explains why Hillary Clinton lost, is, on its face, irrational. The people who didn’t vote in 2016 and the sector of the Trump voters who voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012, the two groups most needed to provide the Democrats with an electoral victory in 2020, simply do not care very much about these issues.

So why would otherwise rational Democrats elected to the House of Representatives follow irrational paths? The interests they serve who help fund their elections would feel betrayed by Democrats willing to consider the kind of radical changes proposed by *Tikkun*, the Green New Deal, the Moral Budget of the Poor People’s Campaign, or in my book *Revolutionary Love* because these plans would lessen their elite funders’ wealth and power. That might

have been a motive for former Vice President Biden to (allegedly) meet with and assure Wall Street power-and-wealth brokers in June that if he were elected in 2020, not much in their lives would change and that they would barely notice the difference. Yet taking this new direction I am proposing is absolutely necessary to address the five problem areas listed at the start of this article. So while establishment Democrats represent themselves as concerned about those problems, they did not during the Clinton and Obama Administrations actually pass legislation that would seriously deal with these issues, and that failure caused great disillusion among those who had taken their promises seriously.

Another reason establishment Democrats follow this self-defeating path has more to do with ego. These establishment Democrats cannot accept responsibility for losing control of the White House in 2016 and the Senate and many State legislatures in the past two decades, so they need to believe that it was really the fault of some clever conspiracy rather than a set of misguided policies and flagrant disregard for large sections of the American people. Yes, there were almost certainly such “conspiracies.” Some have argued that in principle those conspiracies were no more outrageous than all the conspiracies of those establishment Democrats who regularly go to the rich and wealthy to fund their elections, as Joe Biden is doing now. His campaign announced that he would be seeking large donations from the super-rich.

Congressional Democrats’ highest principle seems to be “compromise on principles in order to be effective.” And that leads many Americans to see them as wimps who really stand for nothing except their own self-interest in getting re-elected. So it was no surprise when 129 (a majority) of the Congressional Dems voted

“Congressional Democrats’ highest principle seems to be ‘compromise on principles in order to be effective.’”

for a \$4.6 billion Republican Senate border bill that was labeled “humanitarian aid” but did not include the restrictions that the close to 100 more progressive Democratic Representatives (including the Hispanic Caucus) had insisted upon to keep this money from being used to fund the agencies that are treating refugees cruelly—something that the Trump administration boasts about as an effective way to keep refugees from coming to the U.S. The version that the progressives wanted included language that ensured the release of unaccompanied migrant children from temporary facilities after three months and allowing lawmakers to make visits to facilities without giving advance notice, mandated health and safety standards for detention centers, and reduced funding for ICE. Some of those progressives are angry at Pelosi for calling for a vote on the funding bill before a majority could be assembled to support restrictions on how the money would be used, while others blamed Democratic party U.S. Senators who voted for the bill in the Senate, thus letting it be portrayed as “bipartisan.” The truth is that it was just another of the long line of betrayals of principle for the sake of getting something passed when passing nothing might have been better in the short run. Many of these senators and Congressional reps were simply acting in the tradition of their Democratic predecessors (or themselves) who criticized but funded the war in Vietnam, the war in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq, and who did not stop sales of military supplies and advanced technology airplanes to Saudi Arabia who used them to bomb civilians in Yemen. And this tendency is similarly represented by the Democratic Party presidential candidates who want a gradual approach to repair health care and hence oppose Medicare for All and/or the Green New Deal for similar reasons, and then can be counted on to compromise on their

compromises in the style that Barack Obama consistently used on the grounds of “working with” the other side while Republicans made no

such similar compromises.

When it comes to issues like a living wage or a guaranteed income for everyone or a ban on money in politics or a democratization of the economy, there is another way to understand why many Congressional Democrats and Presidential candidates stay away from pro-working class programs. Many of these establishment Democrats are people who worked their way up the ladder of power or financial success through “working the system” and advancing themselves. They bought capitalism’s self-justificatory ideology: that they live in a meritocracy and anyone with smarts and energy can “make it.” And that is what they achieved. With little awareness of the class structure of society, they believe that their success proves that the capitalist system works as a genuine meritocracy. And, usually unconsciously, they believe that those who didn’t make it didn’t deserve to make it. That belief has been challenged dramatically by the Left when it comes to the fate of women, African Americans, and other identity groups. Gradually, and sometimes grudgingly, these Democratic Party pro-establishment leaders have come to accept that those groups deserve special attention and benefits to compensate for past oppression (though they then compromise on measures to deliver concrete aid).

The one group that most liberals and progressives have not similarly championed in the past fifty years has been the white working class. Partly out of righteous indignation at the way that some important unions supported the war in Vietnam and opposed affirmative action, partly out of never having heard a plausible psychological explanation of why work-

ing people have defected from the Democrats starting in 1980 with the “Reagan Democrats,” these more conservative Congressional Democrats have no real sympathy for working-class people, among whom many of the Democrats grew up. Seeing themselves as having worked the system and “made it,” they unconsciously believe themselves to be better than those who have not been equally successful. So rather than be passionate advocates for the people in their own districts who come from that background, they are lukewarm advocates, and unwilling to challenge the very system that recognized them as deserving.

AOC and the close to 100 other Democrats who challenged their Democratic colleagues and sought to include restrictions on ICE and Trump in the authorization of funds for the border could become the core of a progressive voice that might eventually become the majority of elected Dems. A Democratic Congress and Senate does not necessarily mean a progressive Congress, as this and other votes this year in the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives have made clear. In light of the surge of white nationalist violence in the

Trump years, a progressive majority in Congress with backbone could refuse to fund any of the President’s programs until the Administration and the Senate take powerful action to repent their often violence-and-racism-inciting discourse, their immoral treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers, ban assault weapons, pass a “living wage,” and embrace a serious pro-environment program. Yet all of these will have little traction until the liberal and progressive forces start talking about the pain in most people’s lives, the deprivation of love and caring and a sense of higher meaning (consequences of the globalization of selfishness that is an inevitable product of the capitalist marketplace) that we’ve addressed in *Tikkun* and which is the only path to progressive electoral success in the 2020s. This is a central focus of my forthcoming book *Revolutionary Love: A Political Manifesto to Heal and Transform the World*. ●



RABBI MICHAEL LERNER’s next book *Revolutionary Love: A Political Manifesto to Heal and Transform the World*, will be published by the University of California Press in October, 2019.

In his new book *Revolutionary Love*, Rabbi Lerner develops a strategy for progressives for the next two decades.

“Michael Lerner is one of the most significant prophetic public intellectuals and spiritual leaders of our generation. Secular intellectuals and those who yearn for a major change in the direction of American society can learn a lot from reading his book.” —Cornel West, Professor of the Practice of Public Philosophy, Department of African and African American Studies, Harvard University

“In *Revolutionary Love*, Rabbi Michael Lerner has provided a great theoretical and political service. No one that I am aware of does a better job of using love as a theoretical tool to address these issues and suggest what a politics based on a love of the other might look like. This book is not merely innovative—it is ground breaking in its scope, depth of scholarship, insight, and originality.” —Henry Giroux, Paulo Freire Distinguished Scholar in Critical Pedagogy, McMaster University

## **YOU CAN HELP!**

**Urge your local bookstore to order copies of the book and help us find venues in your state where Rabbi Lerner can speak about these issues once the book is released. It is not a Jewish book—it is of wide general interest (some of its core ideas are found in the literature of all religions and secular humanists). His proposals represent our ideas on what a love-infused socialism could look like. He would be happy to speak anywhere in the U.S., Canada, U.K., France, Germany, etc. at a community center, college or university, lecture series, synagogue, church or mosque, book stores that have speaker series, or any other institutions, activist movements, or human rights or environmental organizations that might be able to work collaboratively with others to bring Rabbi Lerner to your community starting in late October 2019 through the Spring of 2020.**

**When you have some concrete interest from any likely sponsor, please contact [chris@tikkun.org](mailto:chris@tikkun.org) to discuss details.**

# A Cry from the Heart: A Response from Beyond

CAT ZAVIS



Image courtesy of Johannes Plenio/Unsplash

## A CRY FROM THE HEART

**T**HIS WORLD IS TOO PAINFUL TO BEAR. Goddess, Transformative Power, Embodied One, Compassionate Source of Life, don't you see your children are in pain? Don't You hear their cries? Have You shut your ears and closed your eyes? Why? Where are You?

Bombs exploding in Yemen, Syria, Gaza, and elsewhere indiscriminately killing men, women, and children alike while those ordering the bombs rest peacefully. Many sleeping on streets, in doorways, under building awnings, or on heating grates hoping to protect themselves from the changing weather patterns, while privileged others choose which home to rest their bodies and heads each night. Babies and children starving to death while others stuff their bellies full to mask their loneliness or pain. Brave souls locked in prisons around the world for speaking truth to power, some tortured and abused; all in pain. Children ripped from their parents at borders simply for the "crime" of fleeing violence, being born in the wrong place at the wrong time. Rohingyaans in Burma fleeing for their safety; Muslims in China locked in concentration camps, their

family members seeking answers and being met with silence. Women being forced to carry babies to term, even if it threatens their own lives, and once those babies are born, the same people who ordered women to birth those children ignore their needs and refuse to provide adequate support for both the child and mother to thrive. Indigenous peoples fighting to protect their land, traditions, sacred sites, and our planet earth being met with bullets, bulldozers, and water guns from governments and companies who think they own Your Earth. Your Earth is imploding. What makes one of Your children less deserving than another?

I know You are there. The Earth pulsates with Your presence—Your tears falling down in heavy rains; Your fury manifesting in mass fires; Your frustration shaking the earth at its foundation; Your exasperation blowing the winds to wake us up. Don't You see we need You.

## A RESPONSE FROM BEYOND

Here is my articulation of what came to me from the Goddess within as I cried out in pain: Children of the Compassionate One, why have

you turned your back on your fellow human beings? Have you forgotten you came from One Source and to the One you will return? Do you not see the pain of your sisters, brothers, kinfolk? Do you not hear their cries? Do you step over them on the streets? Their outstretched arms, empty hands seeking food; their hearts seeking connection, to be seen—just like you.

What is it you need to see the “other”? To hear their cries; see their suffering? You are lost. You are hurting. How can I help? Will you turn to My embrace? Heed My charge to love the stranger, feed the hungry, take care of the needy? Have you forgotten My promise that there is abundance right here on earth? Be kind and generous, do not bow down to the idols of power, money, and fame, care for the stranger, the other, the needy, pursue justice justly, practice teshuva (reparations, repair, healing), care for the Earth—be partners in the ongoing transformation of life. If you do these things and live this way, you will look upon what you have created and see what I saw—that it is good. It is so much better than good—it is delightful and amazing. And when you realize you can create in ways that nourish all life (of the planet and all life forms), that you can give freely and let life transform in a multitude of ways, that you cannot only accept but embrace diversity, you will experience the awe of the universe and all life. And you will praise life, sing with joy, and celebrate the fullness and miracle of life.

Take a step back. Retreat, even for a few silent, quiet moments. Allow yourself to embrace the reality that every single life form (human, plant, animal) are embodiments of the sacred miracle of life. Allow yourself to relax into the truth that you are sacred as well. The way to manifest your sacredness is to embody sacredness—to treat all life as sacred.

“Take a step back. Retreat, even for a few silent, quiet moments. Allow yourself to embrace the reality that every single life form (human, plant, animal) are embodiments of the sacred miracle of life. Allow yourself to relax into the truth that you are sacred as well.”

Yes this is scary; yes it will test your capacities. Allow yourself to be comfortable with discomfort. I will hold you in your times of fear and need. I will answer your calls and prayers. I will comfort your broken heart. I will sit with you in your times of distress. But only YOU can repair the human world. I have given you the possibility of a world filled with love and justice, blooming with life in all its diversity, overflowing with beauty, abounding with joy and play, and expansively amazing. As you repair the brokenness in the world, all that seems broken will repair more quickly than you can imagine. Love is the glue that binds all life on Earth and in the universe. It is gravity. It is what holds the planets in alignment. It is what causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall. As you embrace love in its fullness by caring for all life and the planet, the inherent love within all life will reach back and respond. Healing, repair, and transformation are possible—that is the essence of Me and of you. Go out and do it—the world is waiting, people are waiting, I am waiting. ●



CAT ZAVIS is the Executive Director of the Network of Spiritual Progressives (NSP), working to bridge spirituality and politics to build a loving and just world. She leads trainings in Spiritual Activism – Prophetic Empathy and Radical Love. To learn more, go to [www.spiritualprogressives.org](http://www.spiritualprogressives.org).



# Coopting the Beatles

PETER GABEL

**T**HE MUSIC OF THE 1960S HAD UNIQUE expressive power because it both expressed and helped to constitute the deepened sense of meaning and purpose that broke through the surface of the world during that historic upsurge of social being. When the Doors sang “Break on through (to the other side),” we knew they were talking about dissolving the false appearances that were enclosing the world and spawning insanity like racial prejudice and the

Vietnam war. We knew that a world of greater love and community was possible. . . and we knew it because we were touching it in the very rising that we ourselves embodied and that imparted to us our knowledge of the social alienation that we were in the act of (partially) surpassing. “Arms that chain us, eyes that lie/ Break on through to the other side.”

Nor was this transcendental quality and meaning accessible only to our generation. My son, who is 23, feels it too and understands it, even though he didn’t live through the historical

moment that produced it. He can tell—he also “tried to run, tried to hide” and he can instinctively transpose his own need to break on through, which he and his comrades are expressing through hip-hop, into a spontaneous grasp of what the Doors were getting at.



For decades now, advertisers have been stealing the meaning of those songs and using the memory of that meaning to sell products. General Motors provided the first example I can recall of this crossover process, where

the sacred is used to market the profane, when the Doors’ own “Light My Fire” was transposed into a jingle for a Buick commercial (a crossover captured beautifully in Oliver Stone’s movie *The Doors*). An even more shocking moment for me personally was when Bob Dylan’s “The Time’s They Are a Changin’” provided the background for a 1994 ad for Cooper and Lybrand, Accountants.

And in this past month, Google has entered the negative alchemy sweepstakes by using the Beatles “Help!” for its television ad that

appears to say that clicking on Google can provide the answer to all human problems. When John Lennon sings out “Help, I need somebody, not just anybody, I feel so insecure, I need you like I’ve never done before,” the Google ad responds instantly with a congeries of rapid-fire clicks for cheap flights to Hawaii, birthday cards for mom, guitar lessons so you can learn to play Help!, the famous Beatles song, wheelchair accessibility—in other words anything you can possibly need help with.

But it’s a mistake to think the function of these ads is to use popular cultural artifacts to simply increase profits. This is the materialist error that still underlies so much Left thought, as if the capitalist system were an autonomous machine of sorts using the form of corporate power to insatiably increase the material assets of the wealthy. A subcomponent of this way of thinking is that whereas “we” are motivated by ideals and longing and aspiration to the better world that our music often speaks to, “they” are motivated by the wish to maximize profits.

But the actual source of the impulse to capture and transpose beautiful, meaningful songs in advertising is found in the very meaningfulness of those songs themselves—in the way that they create beautiful public sound intended to dissolve and surpass the painfulness of our alienated social world, the world enveloped in false appearances masquerading as real. These enveloping false appearances, those newscasters posing as Harry Potter’s dementors guarding the boundaries of our permitted cultural transmissions, are motivated by a Fear of the Other, of each other, that is deeply rooted in a terror of humiliation by each other that we have inherited, via our conditioning since birth, from prior generations. We have been conditioned to feel that the other is a threat, rather than the source of our completion as inherently loving social beings.

The profit system is but a manifestation of that rotating Fear, and the use of our songs to sell products is fundamentally Fear’s response to the songs themselves, Fear’s attempt to pluck the songs out of the airwaves and to re-present them to us neutralized of their transcendent meaning. The singer cries “help I need someone not just anyone to connect with you to break on through to the other side so the waters around us can grow and the wheel’s still in spin so it’s not over yet and so come on baby light my fire and try to set the night on fire.” And fear intervenes in the cry to say, on television, that all is well, that the singer’s longing has already been realized by the world we already have, wheelchair accessible.

And when we watch one of these ads, seemingly backed by infinite resources representing “the world” speaking back to us in our longing that we can only watch from the isolated perch of our couch or chair, we feel ever so slightly defeated, an echo of the much deeper despair that reflects the trauma of our separation from each other that Fear has been engineering since birth, since all of our births.

And yet our fear of each other can never win, but only postpone the revolutionary evolution we are ineluctably a part of. And the next song is always on someone’s lips. ●



**PETER GABEL** is editor-at-large of *Tikkun* and the author most recently of *The Desire for Mutual Recognition*, published by Routledge Press.

Image courtesy of Enrico Strocchi/Flickr. Plaque in English reads: "In memory of the thousands of Jewish victims of intolerance and religious fanaticism who were killed in the massacre that started on 10 April 1506 in this square."

1506-2006  
EM MEMÓRIA  
DOS MILHARES DE JUDEUS VÍTIMAS  
DA INTOLERÂNCIA E DO  
FANATISMO RELIGIOSO  
ASSASSINADOS NO MASSACRE  
INICIADO A 19 DE ABRIL DE 1506  
NESTE LARGO  
5266-5766

# Speaking for the Silenced

RICHARD ZIMLER

**O**N APRIL 19, 1506, A POGROM BROKE OUT in Lisbon, Portugal, led by Dominican priests shouting “Death to the Jews!” and “Death to the heretics!” Rioters following these fanatical churchmen through the city streets ended up murdering some two thousand New Christians, Portuguese Jews who’d been forcibly baptized in a mass conversion nine years earlier. Their bodies were dragged to the main square that is still at the heart of the Portuguese capital—the Rossio—and burnt in two huge pyres in front of the Do-

minican church. Wood for turning them to ash was paid for by sailors visiting from the north of Europe, undoubtedly hoping for an unforgettable spectacle to highlight their stay.

I discovered this crime against humanity in 1990, while researching daily life in Lisbon in the 15th and 16th centuries, but when I asked my Portuguese friends what they knew about the massacre, they all replied, “What massacre? What are you talking about?”

I soon discovered that the pogrom wasn’t

mentioned in Portuguese schoolbooks or even in standard reference works about Portuguese history. The two thousand murdered New Christians—between a third and a half of the city’s population of forcibly converted Jews—had been successfully erased from both individual and collective memory.

Feeling outraged, I decided to make the pogrom the background for the novel I was planning about a Jewish manuscript illuminator living in the Portuguese capital. In such ways throughout my life, I have learned that I have a deeply subversive personality; it gives me a sense of accomplishment to write of events that those with economic and political power would prefer to whitewash or forget.

*The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon* ended up telling the story of Berekiah Zarco, a bright and studious young New Christian who lives through the Lisbon Massacre of 1506 only to discover that his beloved Uncle Abraham, his spiritual mentor, has been murdered in the family cellar. While beset by grief and despair—and with his childhood friend Farid by his side—Berekiah decides to try to track down the killer and seek revenge. But as a Kabbalist interested in the symbolic significance of events, he grows far more interested in what his uncle’s murder and the pogrom mean for his family, the New Christians of Portugal, all of humanity, and even for God. Berekiah offers the reader his own interpretation on the last page of the novel and his words give the narrative an unexpected and chilling significance.

The novel took me a year to research and two years to write, and I did my best to create a narrative in the Kabbalistic tradition—with different levels of meaning that readers must discover and interpret for themselves. At its most accessible level, *The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon* is a classic locked-door mystery, but it is also an account of the spiritual journey of the

narrator and—I hope—a great deal else.

As sometimes happens when writers take on projects that challenge official history, I found it impossible to find a publisher. Over the course of two years, my literary agent sent my manuscript to twenty-four American publishing houses and all of them turned it down. The great majority of editors acknowledged that I’d written a dramatic and insightful book, but they also told my agent that a novel set in Portugal in 1506 had no chance of selling to American readers. One editor at a well-known New York publishing house added that he’d already bought his “Jew book” for the year. Although I was appalled by his word choice, his honesty helped me understand my failure to find a publisher, since it clearly implied that editors maintained quotas. For all I know, even in 2019, such unspoken limits may exist for fiction with Jewish protagonists, as well as those featuring characters who are African-American, gay, Asian-American, or members of any other ethnic or sexual minority.

The twenty-four rejection letters I received left me depressed and disoriented. My literary agent gave up trying to sell rights to the novel. Soon afterward, we parted ways.

By that time—1994—my long-time partner Alex and I had moved from the San Francisco Bay Area to Porto, Portugal, where I was teaching college journalism classes. I spent much of my free time in a haze of despair, wondering what I ought to do with my life, since I obviously wasn’t going to become a novelist.

A crazy idea saved me: why not show the manuscript to a Portuguese publisher? After all, the book was set in Lisbon and all the main characters were Portuguese.

I asked two writer acquaintances of mine for the names of reputable publishers and called up the only editor who appeared on both

lists—Maria da Piedade Ferreira, head of a small publishing house called Quetzal Editores. In my pidgin Portuguese, I described the story to her, and she agreed that I could send her the manuscript. Three months passed without a response, however. When I summoned my courage to call again, she asked for me to come down to Lisbon—three hours by train from Porto—and talk with her. Two days later, when I arrived at her office, the first thing she said was, “What would you like to see on the cover?”

At the time, my Portuguese was poor and I thought I’d misheard her question. “Does that mean you want to publish my book?” I asked.

She smiled reassuringly. “Yes, we loved it,” she said.

I don’t remember anything else about the rest of our conversation because I was dizzy with excitement. I cried on the train back to Porto.

As the publishing date approached, Maria da Piedade warned me that my novel might not sell more than a few dozen copies. She feared that a great many potential readers would resent me, a foreigner, for exposing a crime against humanity committed in Portugal and nearly completely forgotten. What’s more, it was a pogrom fomented by Dominican priests and a great many potential readers would be practicing Catholics.

Unexpectedly, *The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon* reached number one on the bestseller list two weeks after its release. Why? In retrospect, I think that readers were curious about Portuguese-Jewish history, a topic that had been taboo in the country prior to the 1974

“Over the past twenty years, I’ve discovered that writing from the perspective of people who have been systematically persecuted, brutalized, and forgotten gives me the energy—the slow burn of anger—that I need to keep me going over the two to three years it takes me to write a novel.”

Portuguese Revolution and the development of a stable democracy. Prior to the Revolution, Portugal had been a repressive, right-wing dictatorship for nearly fifty years.

And so my career as a writer began in a unique way, with my first novel published originally in a foreign language.

Thanks to the book’s success in Portugal, I was able to find a new literary agent, and she was able to sell rights in Italy, Brazil, Germany, and France. The American publishers to whom we sent the book turned the book down, however—some for a second time. But we were later able to sell rights to a good independent press in New York as well as a promising fledgling publisher in England. Eventually, the book became a bestseller in both countries. The novel has now been translated into twenty-three languages and has taken me on book tours around the world. In Portugal, where a bestseller usually sells about 5,000 copies, it has sold nearly 100,000 copies and changed an entire nation’s outlook on its own Jewish history.

More important than the book’s commercial success, however, is what it taught me: that I cherish the chance to write about people whose voices have been systematically silenced. In Portugal, where I have become a well-known writer, I am often asked to talk at schools and libraries, and one of the talks I most like to give is entitled, “Speaking for the Silenced.” Over the past twenty years, I’ve discovered that writing from the perspective of people who have been systematically persecuted, brutalized, and forgotten gives me the energy—the slow burn of anger—that I need to keep me going over the two to three years it takes me to write

a novel. It also makes me feel as if I'm fighting on the right side of history, which seems the best possible place to be.

In four of my subsequent novels I've written about different branches and generations of the Zarco family that I introduced in *The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon*. My aim has been to create what I call my Sephardic Cycle, a series of independent novels—to be read in any order—that explore the lives of men and women in the far-ranging Sephardic diaspora, which ranges from Brazil and the Caribbean islands all the way to India.

As the saying goes, no good deed goes unpunished, and although these books have been generally well received in Portugal and England, I've often had great difficulty publishing them in America and other countries, and I've also gotten my share of personal attacks and hate mail.

The book that earned me the most resentment, from readers as far away as India, was *Guardian of the Dawn*, which explored how the Portuguese exported its Inquisition to Goa,

a colony on the Malabar coast, about 250 miles south of Mumbai.

In Portugal itself, the Inquisition was first introduced in 1536. Its purpose? To persecute Jews who'd been forced to convert to Christianity in 1497. (Although New Christian is the accepted term for these unfortunate victims of religious intolerance, an epithet used in Portugal for many centuries was *Marrano*, which, according to historians, originally meant swine.)

Any New Christian suspected of continuing to practice his or her traditional faith in secret would be arrested by the Inquisition, interrogated, and tortured. No infraction was too small to incur the wrath of this religious dictatorship. For instance, a converted Jew could end up in prison for simply whispering a Hebrew prayer. Or for cleaning his or her house on Friday afternoon, before the start of the Sabbath. The aim of the torturers was to compel their victims to give up the names of their friends and family members who might also be practicing Judaism in secret.

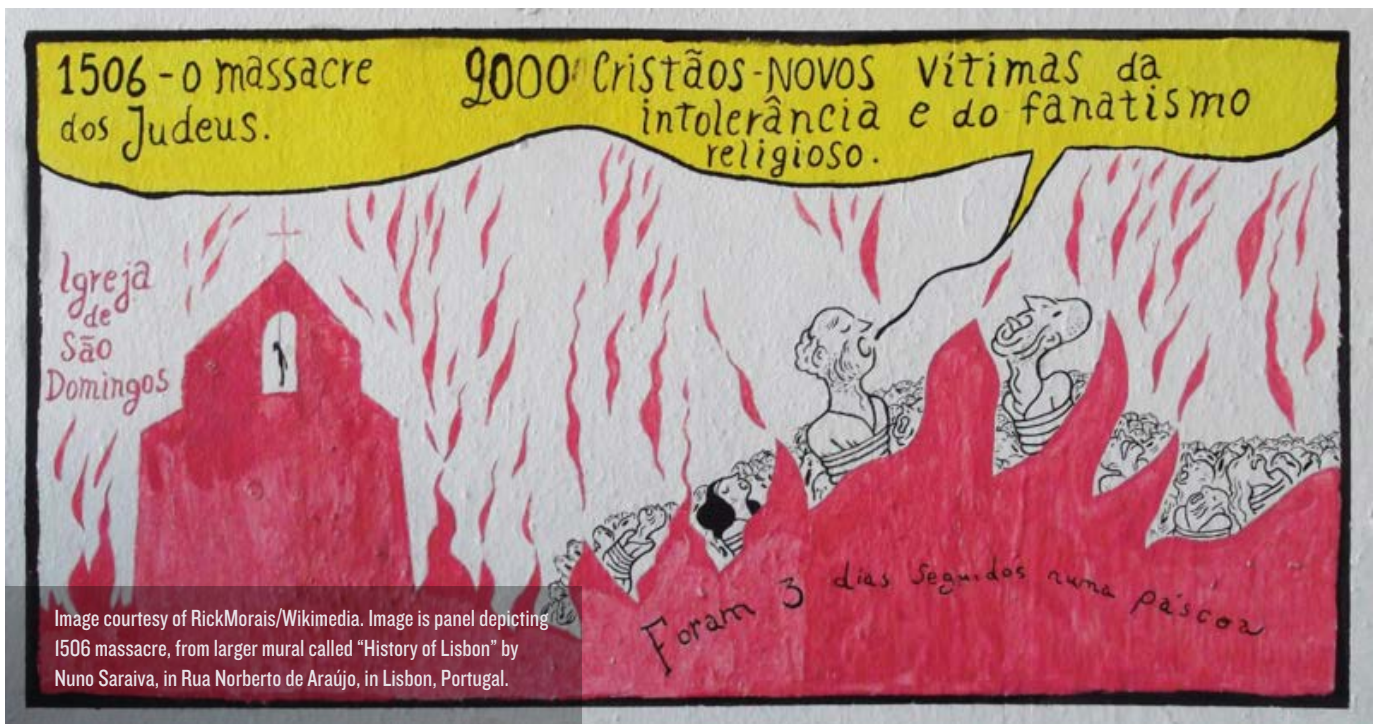


Image courtesy of RickMorais/Wikimedia. Image is panel depicting 1506 massacre, from larger mural called "History of Lisbon" by Nuno Saraiva, in Rua Norberto de Araújo, in Lisbon, Portugal.

Prisoners often spent two years or more in small, nearly lightless cells in special Inquisitorial prisons. If they refused to accept Jesus as the Messiah and make a full confession of their Jewish practices—even if they had become, in fact, faithful Catholics—they would be burnt at the stake in a public ceremony known as an auto-da-fé, meaning act of faith.

Despite the risks of practicing Judaism in secret, the most tenacious New Christians continued to do so. Tens of thousands of them were imprisoned and tortured all the way up to the 1770s, when the Inquisition was finally dismantled.

Many thousands also fled whenever possible to Turkey, Italy, Morocco, and a number of other countries where they could openly practice Judaism, creating the Sephardic diaspora. The great Sephardic communities of cities such as Istanbul, Salonika, Ferrara, and later Amsterdam and London boasted many learned philosophers, physicians, scientists, and financiers who continued to speak Portuguese at home, among them Baruch Spinoza, Uriel da Costa, Gracia Nasi, and Amato Lusitano.

In 1560, Portugal imposed this same religious dictatorship on their colonies in India, which meant that a converted Hindu could be locked up for something as simple as making an offering in their home to Ganesha, the elephant-headed God of Wisdom, or to any other deity in the Hindu pantheon.

In Goa, tens of thousands of converted Hindus and their descendants were arrested and tortured—and hundreds burnt alive—by the Inquisition from 1560 to 1820.

The Inquisition was also a diabolically effective money-making scam, since all the assets of its victims were confiscated and given to the Church.

*Guardian of the Dawn* became the story of a Tiago Zarco, a great-grandson of Berekiah Zarco, the narrator of *The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon*. When Tiago's father—a manuscript illuminator for the Sultan of Bijapur—is arrested on a visit to Goa, Tiago tries and fails to save him and ends up imprisoned himself. Years later, upon his release, he takes his revenge, but it leads to unforeseen—and tragic—consequences.

After the novel was published, I received a number of hate-filled letters from Portugal and India, partly because I'd given an interview to a Lisbon newspaper in which I'd said that canonizing Francis Xavier—the Spanish missionary who petitioned the Portuguese king to establish the Inquisition in Goa—was like conferring sainthood on Goebbels or Göring. A rash declaration? Possibly so, but it's still what I believe.

Most troubling of all, two correspondents from Goa cursed me as a “filthy Jew” and told me that my book was one big lie; they claimed that the Portuguese hadn't exported the Inquisition to its Indian colonies. After reading their enraged letters, I realized that there are Indian Catholics who deny the existence of the Inquisition in India, much as there are some sick and dishonest individuals who deny the existence of the Holocaust.

Another of my books about descendants of Berekiah Zarco, *The Seventh Gate*, also earned me hate mail, this time from neo-Nazis in America and England. It's a novel that explores a crime against humanity that few people even today seem to want to know about: Hitler's sterilization and murder of up to 300,000 disabled people. The narrator, Sophie Riedesel, is a young Christian woman whose younger brother, Hansi, is autistic. When her beloved Berlin is taken over by the Nazis, she vows to do everything she can to undermine their anti-

Semitic regulations and protect her brother from their plans to sterilize him. To live up to her vow, she risks joining a clandestine resistance group called The Ring, headed by her elderly Jewish neighbour, Isaac Zarco.

Curiously, when I went to Stockholm and Gothenberg in 2008 to promote the Swedish edition of *The Seventh Gate*, the Swedish media refused to publish any reviews of my book or articles about my visit. According to my publisher, this was because Sweden had embarked on its own eugenics program to improve “racial purity” beginning in 1934. More than 60,000 individuals were sterilized with state approval, 90 percent of them women, and the program remained active until 1976. At the time I visited, the subject of eugenics was still largely taboo.

Despite all these difficulties, 99 percent of the thousands of letters and emails I have received over the past 23 years have been enormously positive and generous, and such feedback gives me the encouragement I need to keep going when a book of mine is rejected by a publisher or gets a negative review. The most supportive letters I’ve ever received? Very possibly the half a dozen messages I got from Israeli readers thanking me for *The Search for Sana*, which I published in England but for which I was unable to find a publisher in America. A number of editors there told me that they feared a backlash because it’s a novel that portrays Israelis and Palestinians in ways that we don’t generally see in the media. *The Search for Sana* is about two women—Sana, a Palestinian, and Helena, an Israeli—who grow up in the same neighbourhood in Haifa and whose wonderful friendship is undermined and finally destroyed by the conflict between the two peoples.

One of the messages I received was from an Israeli named Dana: “My journey through your book was full of pain, disappointment, anger,



and frustration, but I came out the other end feeling strong in my convictions, and strong in my place in the world. I identified with all your characters—with Sana, Helena, Samuel, Rosa, Zeinab, Mahmoud, and Jamal. I realized I was a human being and that is what I should hold on to, and let go of any other identities. You have told the story of the Israeli-Palestinian tragedy in the most honest way. You have put on paper everything I was carrying within me. I will no longer have to explain, I will just point people to your book.”

I’ll also always treasure the three emails I received from Holocaust survivors who thanked me for *The Warsaw Anagrams*, the story of an elderly Jewish psychiatrist living with his niece, Stefa, in the Warsaw ghetto and whose life comes undone when her young son, Adam,





Image courtesy of Annie Spratt/Unsplash.

is murdered. One elderly survivor who grew up just outside the Polish capital wrote: “I was 14 when I and my family entered the Warsaw Ghetto. I was 16 when I escaped and was hiding in Poland for the rest of the war. Unfortunately the rest of my family did not survive. I was very moved by the details of your descriptions of daily life in the ghetto, which reminded me of many of my own experiences. I cried on reading the description of Stefa’s behavior after the discovery of Adam’s body. She and the other characters were so alive to me that I felt like I knew them all. I was so emotionally involved that when I finished reading the book, I forgot that they lived 70 years ago and would now all be dead. Thank you for your obvious emotional connection to the Holocaust.”

Probably because I never dreamed I’d find

readers in faraway places, it gives me a special thrill to receive emails and letters that come from places like Australia, Brazil, and South Africa. A message sent to me by a Turkish young woman named Eda is particularly dear to me because it confirmed that novels can change the lives of persons whom I’ll probably never meet. The book she’d read, *Hunting Midnight*, tells the story of a friendship between a Portuguese-Scottish young boy, John Zarco, and an African Bushman (San) nicknamed Midnight who comes to live in his home in Porto in the early 19th century. Through these two characters, the book explores the disastrous spiritual and emotional effect of slavery on individual lives and society as a whole. Eda wrote, “I’m a fifteen year old Turkish girl. I am reading one of your books, *Hunting Midnight*. Let me tell you it’s the most impressive novel I’ve ever read. The book actually changed my life, my vision. Even a history book couldn’t teach me this much things while giving me so much pleasure. Before reading your novel, I was a little tired of hearing about Jews and blacks. However, I thank God for the day I saw and bought your book.”

You might think that writing a number of best-selling and well-reviewed novels over the past twenty-three years would make it relatively easy for me to secure good publishers in America and England, but finding takers for my latest novel, *The Gospel According to Lazarus*, proved quite difficult. This novel expands on the story of Lazarus and his resurrection that is told in the Gospel of John.

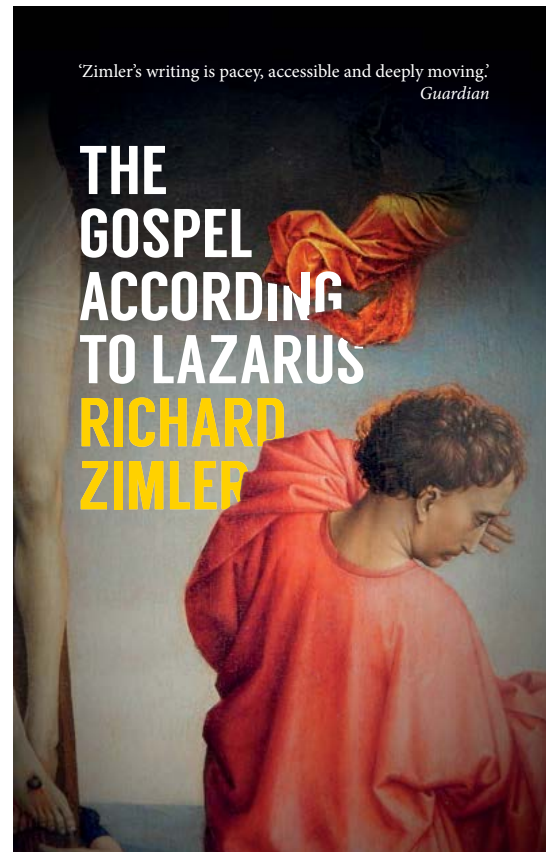
One of my goals in the book, which is narrated by Lazarus himself, was to give Judaism back to Lazarus and Jesus. In consequence, Jesus is known by his Hebrew name Yeshua ben Yosef and Lazarus is Eliezer ben Natan. Additionally, I have characterized Yeshua as a Galilean mystic and healer very much in keeping with his times.

*The Gospel According to Lazarus* is a story about the sacrifices we make to help the people we love most and how we find the courage to go on after suffering a deep trauma. (You can read a review of it on *Tikkun's* website [here](#).) It begins with Eliezer awakening in his stone-cut tomb, unsure of where he is and disoriented. Worst of all, his faith has been shattered because he remembers nothing of an afterlife. Fragile and vulnerable—caught between life and death—he turns to Yeshua for help, and the two men embark on a new phase of their long friendship.

In flashbacks, we learn of Eliezer's first meeting with Yeshua—during their boyhood in Nazareth—and discover how he came to earn his friend's trust and gratitude. Back in the present time—during Passion Week—Yeshua tells him, however, that their meeting as young boys was no accident and offers an astonishing explanation for why he brought them together.

After Yeshua's arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Eliezer concludes that his whole life may have been a test for this chance to save his beloved friend from crucifixion. Only many years later, however—after Eliezer has been forced to flee Jerusalem—does he begin to understand the true role that he played in Yeshua's life.

I grew passionate about this project in part because it has long seemed to me that both Christian and Jewish thinkers have been unfair in their characterizations of Yeshua ben Yosef. In particular, the anti-Semitic interpretations of the Gospels often disseminated by Christian religious leaders have had disastrous consequences for Jewish communities throughout the world and continue to create hatred of Jews in countries such as Poland and Hungary. Such interpretations also seem completely inaccurate to me because they fail to recognize that Yeshua was a Jewish spiritual leader



who embraced the practices and beliefs of his people. As for Jewish thinkers and religious authorities, few of them have been willing to embrace Yeshua as a spiritual leader. As far as I know, the only renowned Jewish philosopher who called for Yeshua to be incorporated into the Jewish canon was Martin Buber.

Nowhere in the Gospel of John is there any indication that Yeshua had any intention of renouncing his Judaism. So presenting him as a Galilean mystic and healer who makes use of the spiritual practices of Judaism as they were understood some two thousand years ago seemed to me an intellectually sound and worthwhile endeavour. Will American readers be willing to accept this departure from traditional Christian and Jewish readings of Yeshua's mission? I don't have any crystal ball, of course, but I've already received a number of emails from readers in England—where the novel was released earlier—telling me my

narrative freed them from their preconceived notions about Yeshua and Eliezer and gave them a fresh outlook on ancient Judaism and the beginnings of Christianity.

**Postscript:**

Back in the fall of 2005, as the 500th anniversary of the Lisbon Massacre of 1506 approached, I asked Jewish community members how they were planning to commemorate this tragic and influential event. When they told me that they had no plans to do so, I offered to brainstorm with them about possibilities or participate in any event they organized.

Jewish leaders ended up holding a solemn ceremony at a downtown hotel on April 29, 2006. I spoke there about the importance of remembering those who've been crushed by religious and ethnic intolerance, whether Jews in Portugal, Native Americans in America, Aborigines in Australia, or any other people in any other country. And why? In my view, in order to create an ethos of justice and fairness and prevent future crimes against humanity. On a more personal note, I also spoke of how gratifying it has been for me to give voice to people who have been systematically silenced.

Some months later, a monument to the murdered Jews was placed in a small square in front of the Dominican Church where the Lisbon Massacre began. I was very moved

when officials from Lisbon City Hall told me the monument would never have been put up without the attention I drew to the pogrom in my novel, *The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon*.

In recent years, the monument has become a place of pilgrimage for Jewish visitors and others who wish to honor the memory of the two thousand forcibly converted Jews whose bodies were burnt in front of the Dominican Church.

In 2014, the Portuguese government also approved a project for which I had long lobbied: to give citizenship to Sephardic Jews living anywhere in the world who are able to provide evidence that their ancestors were from Portugal. As of May of this year, more than seven thousand Jews from Israel, Turkey, Brazil, and a number of other countries had already had their applications approved and been awarded the nationality of their ancestors—men, women, and children who had been tortured and murdered by the Inquisition or forced to flee religious persecution to other countries. ●



**RICHARD ZIMLER'S** new novel, *The Gospel According to Lazarus*, is published by Peter Owen. (You can read a review of it on *Tikkun's* website [here](#).) The author's website is: [www.zimler.com](http://www.zimler.com).



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# The “Paradise Ghetto” and the Tragedy of Misrecognition: A Cautionary Tale for Our Times

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**W**E ARE WITNESSING AN AMERICAN Jewry bifurcated as never before. And this internal conflict is not just limited to Jews in the United States. As European anti-Semitism, occurring against a political backdrop that is eerily reminiscent of the years between the world wars, is rapidly on the rise, we are seeing, not

surprisingly, the irony of the formation of a Jewish wing of the Alt Right party in Germany. Yet anyone familiar with the nuances of German-Jewish history will know of the many attempts to assert a special relationship between German nationalism and Jewish “spirit” as Judaism secularized and replaced a religious identity with a cultural one. The

formation of the Jewish Wagnerian Society in 19th-century Germany, when Jews were banned from joining the German Wagnerian Society, was just one such attempt. The Jewish responses to the collapse of Liberalism at the end of the 19th century, and the slow descent into populist nationalism that eventually led to the Holocaust, is generally framed by contemporary Jewish historiography as either the logical culmination of Jewish self-rejection, or as a Golden Age of legitimate assimilation that was betrayed by the Holocaust. Assimilationist Jewry's "encounter" with its shadow self can be traced back to World War I, when assimilated German Jewish soldiers on the eastern front observed their Eastern European counterparts in the shtetls of Poland and Russia (historian Steven Ascheim's aptly-titled *Brothers and Strangers* remains the canonical work on this subject). Although we are a full century past this encounter between the Jewish East and the Jewish West, the ghost of the German-Jewish tragedy still looms large in the Jewish psyche. We ignore its lessons at our own peril.

In 1934, a year after the Nuremberg Laws were enacted in Germany, Martin Buber gave an address to assimilated Jews at the Lehrhaus, the school he had organized in 1920, with his friend, philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, to address the need for a revived Jewish identity among secularized German Jewry. The title of the address — "The Jew in the World"—was an indication of the threads of territoriality, temporality, and supranationalism with which the Jewish encounter with modernity has grappled from the outset. Buber stated that if the Jews were to ever exist as a solely "political" power, they would perish. At the end of this address, he observed that both the nihilistic assimilationist and ossified orthodox approach to the condition of Jewry takes as its (faulty) premise the *stability* of conditions of the moment. He explains that this is a mistake, for the momen-

tariness of conditions is precisely the thing that needs to be heeded by a community grounded in its collective history yet enacted in the *now*, through deed, in order to survive as a community. The Lehrhaus was intended to counter the dissolution of Jewish identity, an identity which was losing ground to Jewish cosmopolitanism, a development that went hand-in-hand with progressivism. As Hannah Arendt observed in her analysis of anti-Semitism, it was the very invisibility of the Jews as *Jews* in the modern nation states in which they excelled socially, culturally, and economically that rendered them vulnerable when traditional forms of nationalism were being threatened by the types of universalism that progressivism promotes. Our historical memory of progressivism thus evokes the imprint of doom, of our betrayal by enlightened modernity.

The refutation by a wide cross-section of American Jewry of any other Jewish authenticity aside from an Eastern European Jewish legacy, post-Holocaust, discloses a deep sense of discomfort around the history of assimilation. An outcome of this discomfort is that it has created denominational subgroups that have taken on the role of upholding authentic Judaism. This image of *Yiddishkeit* is arguably the most easily recognizable image of Jewishness that we have at hand. However, it often substitutes cultural stereotypes for spiritual legitimacy. If we go back to the German-Jewish legacy, we find similar substitutions at play. On the one hand, assimilated Jewry still operates under the assumption that social assimilation, acculturation, and the primacy of the individual will contain any catastrophic threats of anti-Semitism. On the other hand, there is assimilated Jewry's often conflicting emotions around orthodox Jewry: we relegate these communities to a kind of medievalism, maintaining our distance, while simultaneously glorifying the "authenticity" to which such communities lay

claim. Nostalgia for and co-optation by elites of “folk” forms (or “Volkism,” of which we have our own American variants) invariably happens shortly before these same elites, who are supranational, are about to be “hoisted on their own petard”: the French and Russian revolutions are just two examples that spring to mind. The current situation of assimilationist Jewry does, too.

At this time, a Jewish ecumenicalism is urgently warranted. In case we’ve forgotten what ecumenicalism means, it speaks to cooperation among different religious denominations. This is never easy, and, in the case of Jewry, has the added difficulty of an exilic legacy in which the lines between “religion” and “nationality” continuously bleed into each other. How does a people retain its “national” character among the nations when its theocratic integrity must be contained within the boundaries of “religion”? In many respects, intra-Jewish dialogue is now dominated by the lack of subtlety that characterizes fundamentalist movements in general, along with the binary thinking that conceives of dialogue as betrayal or attack. This relatively recent form of Jewish internecine conflict contains a new kind of absolutist strain that has been gaining momentum throughout modern Jewry’s uneasy encounter with its own rejected legacy. Part of this unease has to do with the doubt around the definition of Jewish authenticity. Those sectors of American Jewry that are able to approach their identity from a nuanced standpoint will understand that the espousal, by some of the most unified and undifferentiated sectors of the Jewish community, of the latest iteration of conservative nationalism into mainstream political life is inextricably tied to the provisional nature of Jewish “whiteness.” It is also tied to the anti-Islamicism to which such whiteness is wed. Poised between the white and non-white worlds, Jews socialize “upwards” at their own

peril, mistaking social mobility for a secular status that guarantees us, when the chips are down, no secure footing whatsoever.

Historically, our attempts at vertical secular integration—think of the great capitals of Europe before World War II and of the role of assimilated Jews in places like Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, or Prague—have failed. Assimilating Jewry has routinely mistaken its social, cultural, or economic successes for acceptance in the nations in whose development they have inarguably played a major role. But when nationalism and populism rear their heads, we discover, over and over again, that the culture in which we believed we had assimilated was, instead, a culture we had created in which we could talk to other assimilated Jews, a culture which runs parallel to existing national and political trajectories of unquestioned “whiteness.” Historically, the periods during which we take for granted our full inclusion as both citizens and as Jews is when we are at our most vulnerable. What is particularly trying right now is that the increasing alienation between left and right within American Jewry must also engage with the alliance between conservative religious values and engagement with a reactionary agenda that necessarily includes Jews, regardless of their personal degree of religiosity or secularization, as its targets.

This idea of “whiteness” and who can lay claim to it has been the motivation for all kinds of mischief, whether we are talking about the Crusades or the West’s more recent legacy of 19th-century imperialism. What we are really doing when we frame “whiteness” in this way is attempting to gloss over the extremes of social and economic inequality that develop when the demands of capitalism and the ideals of the Enlightenment try to find space on the same page. Liberalism, historically, has long been conversant with commercialism. Jews owe their entrance into the modern world to



the loosening of hierarchical systems that allowed for social and economic mobility and the primacy of the individual as a human being, in other words, the idea of universal rights. The idea of the “white Jew,” which itself has a long history, has several implications. It is connected to social mobility by virtue of assimilation—a Jew can “pass” in a way that we apply primarily to the African-American idea of “passing,” when one’s racial or ethnic background can be submerged. Yet “white Jew” has another implication that stems from ideas of Christian virtue and the belief held by much of the Christian world during the formative years of capitalism that Jews were morally defective. A “white Jew” was a Jew absolved of Jewishness in both the religious and commercial sense of the word, especially in a world in which the institutionalized competition that defines capitalism is presumed to have harmful moral effects.

Reactionary strains among Jewry define Jews as “white” when they are defending the United States against an onslaught of “non-white” refugees in the very country that gave many of us shelter when our relatives fled pogroms or the Holocaust, when we were intermittently not even considered, to borrow the title of Ian

Haney-Lopez’s seminal 1996 book, “white by law.” We could do no better for a healthy model of religious and cultural integration than to look to the communities of Latin American immigrants in this country, whose church plays a role similar to that of the “shul” in Jewish American life during the great waves of Eastern European immigration that started at the end of the 19th century.

Yet these same reactionary elements within American Jewry lay claim to being “non-white” when they wish to play the politics of special interests, or to speak with impunity regarding the role of suffering in our historical cosmology. The espousal of reactionary policies is utilized by those sectors of Jewry that support them to create a narrative in which these policies are somehow in alignment with Jewish religious values and Jewish nationalism, broadly misinterpreted as Jewish self-acceptance. The combined formula of seeing anti-Semitism everywhere and at all times (much as anti-Semites see Jewish influence everywhere and in everything) and the belief in a special relationship to an absolute transcendental authority forecloses meaningful intra-Jewish dialogue. Likewise, there is little chance that assimilated American Jewish communities, lulled into a sense of complacency by their secular success, will manage where Jewish communities from Hellenism to the Iberian idyll to the relatively recent (historically speaking) events in Germany and Central Europe failed. It is unlikely that the orthodox communities will lend the legitimacy to assimilated Jewry that dialogue requires. Nor are they likely to approach the non-orthodox on equal terms, especially if assimilationist Jewry is, by definition, comprised of dispersed individuals related, at best, by a family resemblance. It seems equally unlikely that secular Jewry would be able to engage with Orthodox Jewry without taking, consciously or not, an inferior position, feeling that

there is a truth verging on necromancy that renders the condition of secularization as one of “internal exile,” perhaps better understood as that of “The Simple Son” from the Passover Service. Of the four sons—the wicked, the wise, the silent, and the simple—it is the simple son who, rather than distancing himself from the Seder as the wicked son does, is altogether ignorant of its meaning.

The traditionalist Jewish alignment with authoritarian figures that we are currently witnessing is by no means unprecedented in the modern Jewish experience. Jews have run before to the sheltering embrace of authoritarian figures, historically aligning with “the State.” In the past, this was motivated by the need to seek protection from those upon whose largesse Jewish populations depended for their very survival, as well as to create a buffer zone between Jewish communities and the local nationals who resented them. Insofar as the Jews are the people of modernity par excellence, it follows that they will also inhabit modernity’s extremes in terms of political allegiances at both ends of the spectrum. Historically primed to anticipate the most minute social shifts, the Jews are a kind of early-warning detection system, the canary in the coal mine, when populism begins to broaden its base. The massacres in Pittsburgh and San Diego are shocking but not surprising. One might well ask why they didn’t occur sooner. We must now contend with the dissolution of Jews into warring camps. On the left, progressive Jews find common cause with a party that includes many non-Jews who see Jews as suspect of a bi-nationalism that is “anti-universalist.” This universalism, which is a hallmark of modern political ethics, is reductively fashioned as “the nihilism of the Left” by Jews on the right, who

feel that the only chance for Jewish survival lies in isolation. This isolationist camp aligns with those who see unquestioning support of Israel as a litmus test for a populist American patriotism. In this Jewish narrative, populism in both Israel and the United States is understood as the only viable pre-emptive method to tackle the resurgence of global anti-Semitism. This reductive approach, of which both sides are guilty, can only create added chaos and distract us from the serious dangers that may well lie ahead. The most recent factionalism generated by our own political ferment and by the Israeli elections only further diffuses the boundaries between church and state, citizenship and nationality. Some of us are now confronted with the challenge of explaining to our fellow Jews—along fault lines that often run within families—that our anti-anti-Semitism

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is not, in fact, anti-Zionism. We should be mindful of the fact that our current situation is not merely the usual background noise to the uneasy relationship between “the Left” and “the Jews.”

On some level, a Jewry fraught with internal conflict is alive and at the center of the meaning of Jewish community. Conflict makes us irritatingly cognizant of the fact that we cannot be rid of each other, cannot write off our collective historical connections to each other, or neatly reduce our self-definition to any of the categories—religious, ethnic, social, political—that would finally imply normalization. Normalization, in fact, might herald the end of what is loosely understood as the Jewish mission. Clearly, in Trump’s America, as in the increasingly reactionary sectors of much of what we had understood to be the civilized, enlightened world, we have no need to fear



an end to the idea of this mission anytime soon. The unprecedented events in Pittsburgh have made certain of that: rather than uniting American Jewry, Pittsburgh and San Diego have simply driven the wedge deeper. To be an American Jew appalled by Trumpism and all that it represents is now at the same time to risk being accused of Jewish self-hatred. How is this even possible? How is it that the politics of religious identity have created a situation in which there are Jews who openly, even avidly, support a leader who supports self-proclaimed neo-Nazis? How can it be that they understand this as American patriotism in the service of Jewish survival? The Jewish “Pax American,” which provided a sense of safety unprecedented in modern Jewish history, is at an end.

So perhaps it is time to revisit the work of another witness to modern Jewish history, a witness who was willing to subject the condition of Jewry during the Holocaust to an internal critique. Nearly seventy years after the book first came out in German, the first English-language edition of Holocaust survivor and author H.G. Adler’s monograph on the *Theresienstadt Ghetto—Theresienstadt 1941–1945: The Face of a Coerced Community*—finally reached the American audience for which he had originally intended it. Upon H. G. Adler’s arrival in Theresienstadt (or Terezín), he set about creating an account of his experiences there, from a multifaceted perspective. He spent the rest of his life producing works that probed the dangers of dehumanization inherent in modern ideological movements. Despite support from

figures as influential as Albert Einstein and Ralph Bunche, his works on Terezín were not translated into English during his lifetime. The climate for Adler’s very particular take on the Holocaust had always been a hard sell due to the complex and nuanced nature of the work as well as the critical eye Adler brought to bear on the ghetto’s leadership, whose participation in the running of the ghetto introduces the disturbing possibility of passive collusion. It took so many decades of work on the part of Jewish historians of the Holocaust to create an environment in which Adler’s observations would not create a defensive knee-jerk reaction among his intended audience. Fast-forward from the post-war world in which the book was written to our current situation as Jews. None of the ramifications of the present political moment would be lost on Adler.

In addition to its merits as one of the great masterworks of Holocaust commentary and documentation, *Theresienstadt 1941–1945: The Face of a Coerced Community* is at heart a meditation on the failure of community. Adler, an assimilated, acculturated Jew whose world would be destroyed in the conflagration of the



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Holocaust, recognized that Judaism's spirit had been lost and that the factionalized, a-communal nature of modern Jewry was implicated in this loss. What Adler calls a "Zwangsgemeinschaft," a "coerced community," is not to be confused with an ordinary "judische Gemeinschaft"—the official Jewish communities that governed relations between Jews and the various states in which they resided in the modern era. Nor is it the "Notgemeinschaft," the emergency community, haphazard and provisional, thrown together in crisis, before the ghetto had its Jewish administration. Yet in describing this failed communalism, Adler identifies with and speaks for no single Jewish group. Adler redefines the ghetto's Jewish community as a "Schicksalgemeinde," or in English, a community of fate, or of destiny.

What would, under Nazi occupation, become the Theresienstadt Ghetto was originally built as a garrison town to serve the Small Fortress of Theresienstadt in the 1780s. From the standpoint of the SS, the Theresienstadt Ghetto was used to navigate the problems inherent in reversing assimilation and implementing the steps that would ultimately lead to the Final Solution. Like other ghettos, it was a conduit to concentration camps and extermination centers in the east. Unlike other ghettos, it served an important propaganda function. Conceived of as a temporary location to which prominent Jews, Jews with international connections, decorated veterans, and the elderly could be sent to seemingly wait out the war—and "produced," if need be—the fortress town appeared tailor-made to both the stated as well as the hidden aims of this ghetto. The ghetto thus became a point of confluence for SS special interests, involving the highest functionaries of the party, while at the same time, precisely because of this propaganda role and the way that it was misunderstood by the Jewish community, it also became a place of Jewish special

interests. The self-deception of the Jews of Theresienstadt was thus part and parcel of the Nazi deception of the Jews.

As Adler documents it, the Theresienstadt Ghetto, initially presented as the "legal community" of the "Jewish Settlement Area," had been misconstrued by the leadership of the Jewish community as a form of Jewish nationalism that, rather than functioning as true Jewish communalism, merely mimicked the European nationalisms—modern programs of redemption—that had traditionally proven catastrophic for Jewry. Due to its location and special function, Theresienstadt was host to a highly variegated cross-section of Jewry at the time of its greatest crisis. These included Czechs, Germans, Dutch, Danes, Austrians, Hungarians, nationalist of every stripe, atheists, orthodox Jews, observant Jews, *mischlinge* (half- or quarter-Jews), and several hundred practicing Christians who counted among their number priests and nuns of Jewish descent.

For Adler, no known normalization of the Jews appears possible. In his chapter on "The Transport," Adler details the "two alternatives, only superficially contradictory" that the Jews are presented with in modernity as an antidote to ceaseless wandering. The first option is one in which the Jewish individual is absorbed and put on equal footing with other individual nationals. The second is one in which the Jewish community as a whole is put on equal footing with other nations via a final migration. The first option, however, necessitates the individual Jew's relinquishing his or her uniqueness as a Jew for inclusion within a given nation. The second requires the Jewish community's relinquishment of its defining meta-historical nature in order to take its place among the historically-grounded nations.

Mirroring these two options, Adler sees two other options—one that might have avoided

the full scope of the catastrophe of the Holocaust. That would have been for the Jewish community to have done what the Nazis attempted (and failed) to do to cover up their crimes at war's end—to have destroyed all of the documents and records of the Jewish community in Prague upon the Nazi takeover in March of 1939. (This idea, often credited to Hannah Arendt in her controversial *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, is stated quite clearly in Adler's discussion of the role of the Jewish leadership. Arendt, who had initially attempted to secure American publication for the work, was deeply familiar with Adler's criticism.) The path that the Jewish leadership chose instead was that of accommodation: negotiating, delaying, protecting those they could, and taking refuge in gradualism. It was a survival strategy that was virtually encoded in Jewish genes. This hopeless strategy reached extremes under Nazi occupation and resulted in what the historian Götz Aly has referred to as the "save-what-you-can" game. This path of accommodation, with its belief in the benefits of gradualism and in Jewry's own ability to tolerate incremental increases in the stakes regarding the transfer, first, of Jewish property and, then, of Jewish persons, is symptomatic of the Jewish position in modern times as a whole.

While the establishment of Theresienstadt and the accommodation and gradualism of the councils and communities involved can be seen historically as an aspect of the impossibility of full emancipation, Theresienstadt only succeeded in furthering the goals of the SS precisely because its very existence could *only* be understood as an historical anomaly by the majority of those very Jews who were destined to be in the ghetto: the Jewish bourgeoisie, and

social and cultural elite who would form a new class of "prominents" among the prisoners. The *Kulturjuden* or the Jewish "bourgeoisie of culture" unwittingly eased the path toward the implementation of the Holocaust via administrative structures manned by assimilated elites, a class that had conflated social prestige with political power and had internalized the nor-

malative structures of reason and rationality bequeathed to them by the very Enlightenment that had made possible their emancipation.

It was, indeed, "exceptions" and "exceptionalism" as both concept and practice that had determined much of the character of the emancipatory process

itself—class-based, particularist, partial, and ever-shifting. It meant that the Jews entering the modern arena were already, to varying degrees, divided against themselves. The role of "exceptions" has offered a formula for genocide and enslavement throughout modern history. In the case of enslavement, the leadership of a targeted people is destroyed. In the case of genocide, the leadership is put in charge of organizing the destruction of its own people. This latter strategy was put into practice throughout the ghetto system under the Nazis. If Auschwitz is broadly understood as the place where modernity's failures find their starkest and most horrifying expression, then Theresienstadt is the absolute expression of the Jewish mis-recognition of the self in modernity, a mis-recognition in which the meaning of power, of law, of administration, and of ethics are conflated. In other words, a political situation startlingly similar to our own.

Theresienstadt had its administrative caste, its cultural elites, its slaves, and its sacrificial lambs. This last category was constituted by the dispensable rank-and-file who, for the sake

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of the survival of the Jewish nation, could be sent on transports east in lieu of those who would justify the ghetto's continued existence as a propaganda charade. Or who, failing that, would constitute a more able remnant to rebuild the new Jerusalem that would signal the rebirth of the Jewish people. Ultimately, the attempt failed, and nearly the whole of the ghetto's cultural elite was transported east in October of 1944. And yet this remnant was wholly representative of the Jews' "participation in a world lost in error" that Adler identified as the Jews' undoing. This administrative caste, whose misuse of ethics was legitimized by its maintenance of provisional power was, however, at the mercy of its shadow authority—the legal domination of the SS. As the late Anglo-Jewish philosopher Gillian Rose put it, the Jews are, at their own peril, forever posited from both within and without as "the sublime other of modernity." A modernity in which community is understood as ideally able to tolerate the stressors of social, religious, political, racial, and national spheres of particular interest is also, unfortunately, the modernity in which the un-assimilability of a given community into the universalizing principle of particular communities could even arise as a problem to be solved.

Despite the claims of Jewish humanism in both its secular and religious contexts, it's not unreasonable to say that liberalism has been problematic for the Jews. Liberalism has a built-in contradiction. The very liberalism that asserts a vision of civic inclusion and universalism does so by attempting the paradox of enforcing universality while trying to uphold both individual and national rights. It is, in fact, the nationalities question itself that became the touchstone that made it possible to imagine a "final solution" to "the Jewish Question." Or that posed "the Jewish Question" as a problem to be solved politically. The Enlightenment's

stated intention had emphasized humanity and reason above all else, yet it could only have been realized through a system that reduced "humanity" to entities to be categorized—a system that was the very antithesis of reason, or rather, "reason" taken to limits so brutally rational that it begins to inhabit the ungraspable sphere of anti-reason, that is, of revelation.

So how do we assess when our internal conflicts are generative of community and how do we assess when they are destructive of community? The conditions that are external to the Jewish community, defined as broadly and inclusively as possible, might be a way of looking at this. Writing of the misguided sense of the nature of political identity on the eve of the Holocaust, Adler writes that "suddenly, with a mere stroke of the pen, people of the most varied dispositions and backgrounds were reduced to the category of 'just Jews.'" The belief that Jewish identity is self-determined and subjective, that it is a voluntary work of personal conscience rather than something that is assigned to us at birth, is a luxury. It's the *a la carte* method of self-definition, and in times of political extremism, it can quickly become irrelevant. We were non-Europeans in Europe.



The Zionist solution led to Israel becoming a European state in a non-European environment, differing little, at least to the non-European environment, from other colonizers over the centuries. To many non-Jews, American Jewry's perceived uniform allegiance to Israel undergirds Jewish "otherness." Yet, in seeming contradiction, Israel's existence also acts as a lightning rod for anti-Semitism in the larger world outside of Israel, or as it is termed in its religious-national framework, *Galut*, or exile.

As recent political history has too frequently shown, progressive Jewry's ethical desire to find common cause with other marginalized groups calls both the definition of Jewish identity as separateness into question as well as Israel's territorial and moral rights to exist into dispute. Meir Kahane, founder of the Jewish Defense League and ultra-nationalist, derisively called progressive Jewry "the Hebrew lemmings," running, arms outstretched, toward their own destruction at the hands of the very people for whose rights they had fought. Can Jewish survival coexist with Jewish ethics? We must find a version of Jewish inclusivity that understands the pragmatism of enlarging the meaning of interdenominational Judaism and its relationship to Israel as a fundamentally Jewish principle. The failure to attend to this is only furthering the alienation many American Jews are already feeling toward the Jewish State. Throughout the history of the modern nation-state, Jews of all stripes have been vulnerable to accusations of divided loyalties. If, since the formation of the Jewish State, these suspicions now have a terrestrial dimension, then perhaps the only way through the threat that populism now poses to Jews across the spectrum and the threat that populism poses within Israel itself is to go deeper into a connection with an Israel of which we can morally feel we are a part. Whether progressive Jewry identifies with Israel or not, its fate is inextricably

tyed to the role of Israel in the world.

Progressive Jewry, in keeping with its liberal Enlightenment roots, sees Jews as individuals freely making choices as to their degree of identification with their Judaism across a vast array of categories. Orthodox Jewry sees the Jews as a disunified theocratic unit that has violated its agreement with God and is in need of repair to re-establish political, religious, and social uniformity. Neither position resolves the multitude of options that the American experiment has, so far, presented to the Jews. The position of American Jewry has been unique in this nation of immigrants. We live in what was intended to be a republic. A republic, as Hannah Arendt pointed out, involves citizenship rather than nationality, and should ideally be able to tolerate a variety of national allegiances as long as these do not contradict the duties of citizenship. The conditions of the moment demand that American Jews have the opportunity to support an Israel that makes them feel included in a communal Jewish identity. This identity can only speak to an expanded identification with Israel. For that to happen, we cannot have a Jewish homeland that takes a populist nationalistic agenda and justifies its abuses as a survival strategy. First of all, this agenda is hastening rather than mitigating the very threats that it fears will destroy it. Secondly, if you asked the majority of Jews in *Galut* if they wanted a state that represented their "peoplehood" in this way and at this price, it's uncertain they would agree that the situation is sustainable, let alone ethical. Being present to these conditions would also negate the dangers of a nostalgia that seeks to return Jewry to a fantasy of the way things were in an age before infection by foreign elements. This kind of nostalgia is operative in all extremist positions. If Jews from across the spectrum are to avoid the dangers of a fractured community, a place to start might lie precisely with the idea



only as broken as your unwillingness to meet me on my own terms.

Are we now two separate Jewish worlds in which progressive Jewry, in order to build common cause with the Left, is compelled to renounce Israel? The sharp turn to the Right that is sweeping the west requires that we ask ourselves if we are going to

of the “community of fate” that Adler describes. If I had to speak to my orthodox relatives, here is what I would say: You, as orthodox Jews, are the upholders of the traditionalist Jewish “religious” realm, while I count myself among the upholders of the progressive Jewish worldly realm. This is not to say that you do not have worldly concerns, nor to say that my Jewishness is devoid of a spiritual dimension. But we must find a way together to be ethical in the worldly plane that protects and respects our shared heritage, a heritage that is rooted in the religious plane. We must speak to each other before seeking shelter in partisan political agendas of the non-Jewish world, because we will be ultimately jettisoned by the very agendas with which we imagine we have found common cause. You will meet me as an equal co-national in our “community of fate” without trying to “return” me to a religiously observant Judaism from which I myself have not come. On my part, I will do my best to navigate the lurking fear that if I follow my moral compass, it could potentially lead to the annihilation of my people. Please do not try to fix me, for I am

make the same mistake as we did last time by not seeing ourselves through the eyes of non-Jews and not realizing that we are reducible to an undifferentiated status by those in power. Israel’s sharp turn to the Right adds another layer of complexity that was not at play on the eve of the Holocaust. The Zionist dream in its earlier incarnations was a Left, labor-based vision of what an ideal Jewish society might look like. We would do well to recall its origins, and to remember that neither assimilationist Jewry nor the ultra-Orthodox were fully behind the idea, the former, because it betrayed their ideas of citizenship, the latter, because, in the absence of the Messiah’s arrival, it was premature. It was only with the looming threat of a Europe “free of Jews” that emigration to Palestine, when and where permissible, became attractive to assimilationist Jewry.

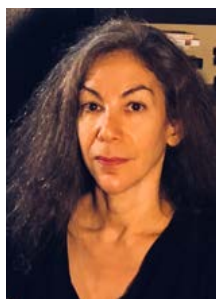
We cannot forge common cause with both the Left and the Right, which is what the overlapping complexities of post-Holocaust Jewry in late modernity often demand of us. Moreover, we are perceived by much of the non-Jewish

world as historically embodying these contradictions: we are, alternatively, the chief capitalists and the arch communists, upholders of systems of oppression as well as destabilizers of these systems. Progressive Jews are guilty of the nihilism of the Left as well as its utopianism. Jews on the Right are complicit in its bunker mentality and its narcissism. We are all things to all people to our detriment. This amorphousness only undergirds the double consciousness that any people transplanted to an alien or hostile environment retains in its psyche.

Jewish involvement in the civil rights movement was similarly enacted from this position of neither/nor. The marriage of liberal democracy and capitalism has an inherent flaw that the free market philosophers could not have fully comprehended in the absence of colonialism: this marriage has retained a class-based structure that turns competitiveness into inhumanity in the face of issues of race. This structure, which allows for a degree of social mobility through competition, breaks solidarity among and within oppressed groups by claiming impartiality while holding out the promise that social mobility can overcome economic and racial inequality. When the financial interests of the status quo become threatened by grassroots movements, these otherwise reasonable strains of capitalist activity in a liberal democracy will run to the sheltering wings of absolutism. Seeking shelter in Trumpist absolutism is further enabling the system that fosters the conditions that generate anti-Semitism and makes Jews across the spectrum fearful of embracing a universalism that defies the evils, including anti-Semitism, that rampant capitalism intensifies. When capitalism is allowed to operate unchecked, its feudal remnants, which are always dormant, are reactivated. The preconditions for fascism are being played out as we speak. At the moment when a Jewish

ecumenicalism is most needed, it is very hard to expect Jews in the liberal and progressive world to ally with that section of the Jewish world that is actively supporting the policies of a far Right that strengthen the desperation and fear that lead to fascism. Jews across the spectrum will be among its first victims regardless of their belief in a given administration's support for Israel.

In the final chapter on the history of the ghetto, Adler reports that Adolf Eichmann, upon the transfer of authority over to the Allies, a transfer which involved brinkmanship right up until the last possible second and managed to avoid a bloodbath, informed the International Red Cross who were brokering negotiations that he had created Theresienstadt in order to "revive a sense of community among the Jews." Progressive Jews would do well, in this climate in which democracy is increasingly relegated to the realm of identity politics, to recreate a Jewish community based in a Jewish ethics that can withstand the pressures of our political landscape before someone else does it for us. ●



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Image courtesy of START Gallery/Flickr.  
"The Healers: Frantz Fanon," 2009, Rudy Shepherd

# Introduction to Decolonization Section

**BENJAMIN STEINHARDT CASE**

**A**T LEAST SINCE THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION of 1791, revolutionaries have discussed *decolonization*. Imperialism was not merely military occupation, it was the violent imposition of an order—governmental organization, logic, knowledge, and culture. The political language of decolonization as we know it comes from the 20th century liberation struggles of Africa, Asia, and the Americas, and in particular from Frantz Fanon. As Fanon articulated it, decolonization is about

overthrowing European colonial occupations and undoing colonial ways of thinking and being. In other words, decolonization is the process of disordering the colonial order, and re-ordering the world into something just.

Fanon was a psychotherapist from Martinique who, after studying in France and practicing in Algeria, joined the Algerian resistance and wrote two widely influential books on racial identities, psychology, and anti-colonial struggle. Fanon has often been pigeon-holed



into his endorsement of violent revolution (not unlike Malcolm X, who is famously juxtaposed to Martin Luther King’s “nonviolence”), but as Hannah Arendt once observed, it seems as though few students read Fanon’s 1961 book, *Wretched of the Earth*, past the opening chapter, titled “On Violence.” Fanon’s work in *Wretched*, which is his most famous, as well as his seminal 1952 volume, *Black Skin, White Masks*, is really about what it means to recognize, expose, and disrupt colonial regimes of state and mind that have been both aggressively beaten and more subtly socialized into people over generations.

In 1957, at roughly the same time as Fanon was solidifying his theories, Tunisian Jewish novelist and revolutionary Albert Memmi wrote *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, in which he comes to strikingly similar conclusions as Fanon about the insecurity complexes inherited by both French colonizers and North African colonized peoples. Memmi writes from the subjective position of a Jew in North Africa, which he identifies as being awkwardly in between the two camps, understanding both because he was in a way part of both, but at the same time not fully part of either.

Last year, I published [Decolonizing Jewishness: On Jewish Liberation in the 21st Century](#) in *Tikkun*, in which I follow Memmi’s logic and argue that historical Jewish positionalities do not conform to the “black and white” archetype on which Fanonian decolonial theory has been based. This essay emerged from an internal examination of my own Jewish identity and experiences, but I believe its argument has broad implications. Fanon’s extensive discussion of Jews as a comparison category for Black people in *Black Skin, White Masks* is no accident—the “Jewish Question” has

“At its core, decolonization pushes us to reexamine how we know the things we know and why.”

been a lightning rod for debates over political ideology since before Marx. At the same time, the intervention is not meant to be limited to Jews alone, but rather to nuance the language of, and expand the possibilities for, decolonial thought and practice for peoples and contexts that do not neatly fit a black/white binary. Based on responses to this article, I was asked to contribute as a co-editor to this issue.

For whom is the project of decolonization? In the preface to *Wretched of the Earth*, French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre makes it clear he believes colonial Europe needs to reckon with decolonization as much as—though in a different way than—colonized Africa. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon himself points to the particular insecurity complexes developed by colonizer and colonized alike, complexes which must be

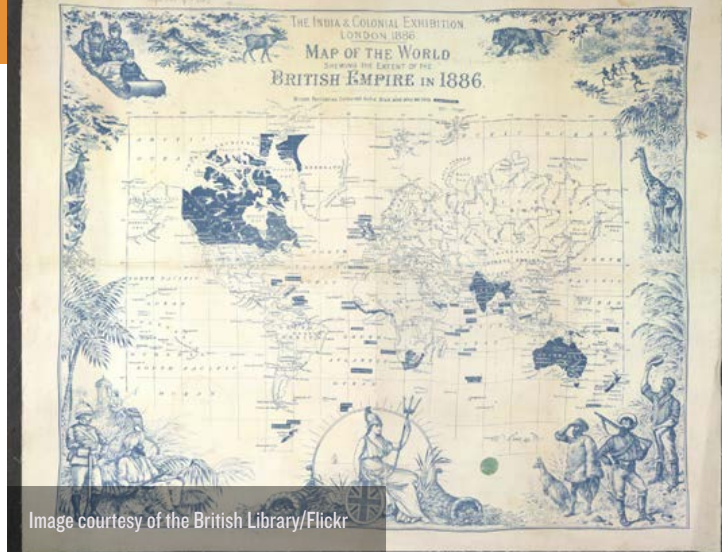
overcome through action if a just future involving people who come from both groups is possible. Nevertheless, the language, theory, and praxis of decolonization we have today has predominantly emerged from African and African diaspora communities and individuals, and it is not at all agreed upon which people can be legitimate bearers of decolonial struggle.

Like my essay *Decolonizing Jewishness*, the pieces assembled within this issue represent a humble contribution to the discussion, from a number of nontraditional perspectives, inspired by the expanding discourse of decolonial theory in our time. With this in mind, I briefly introduce the articles in this section below. I encourage readers to make use of this introduction and its bibliography as the context within which to reflect on the contributions that this issue of *Tikkun* offers.

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Beginning in the 1960s, the call to decolonize has become absorbed into revolutionary canon through national liberation struggles around the world, and in the US through groups like the Black Panther Party, Young Lords, and American Indian Movement. Today, the global discourse of decolonization has facilitated solidarity and collaboration between the Movement for Black Lives, the Palestinian liberation struggle, Sioux-led protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline, and more. It has also become a heated subject of debate through practice and theory among activists in colonial, post-colonial, and colonizer countries.

In 1986, Kenyan writer and philosopher Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o published *Decolonizing the Mind*, a collection of essays and reflections on what it takes to practice languages of knowing and communicating that jettison the imposed colonial mindset. To Ngũgĩ, the essence of decolonial practice is about decentering Western epistemologies, that is, European colonial ways of thinking and knowing, which had been forcibly imposed on most of the world while erasing other bodies of knowledge. Paul Buhle's essay in this issue gives an introduction to the thought of Trinidadian communist and historian C.L.R. James—a thinker who, I agree with Buhle, stands to be more widely read by those interested in the struggle for liberation. And Kenneth Harrow's piece surveys the modern history of African and African American cinema in attempting to use what was at one time a colonial form of media as a tool to subvert the colonial gaze. To this day, the struggle to decolonize curricula is being waged in universities and schools across the world; what canons and classical thinkers should we learn, what languages should we learn in, from whom, through which pedagogical models, and for what purposes? (See Chinguno et al 2017; Freire 1970; Naidoo et al 2017; and Rhodes Must Fall, Oxford 2018.)



One of the hottest points of contention has been the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) based in (formerly) colonizer countries, which provide poverty relief and international aid to (formerly) colonized countries. Do these organizations redistribute resources from “Global North” to “Global South” or do they reimpose patterns of dependency, colonial logics, and a relationship of superiority/inferiority? Stephen Esquith's essay introduces readers to this debate, and argues for the decolonial, or at least democratizing potential of NGO work. At the same time, Western-based NGOs have directly facilitated instability and even coups in Global South countries—for example, NGOs have played a role in recent political developments in Venezuela, which you can read more about in Laura Wells' piece in this issue.

Colonialism and anti-colonialism are often thought of as colliding political-cultural forces on the same track, but what happens when the anti-colonialism of one is the colonization of another? Hatem Hassan illuminates these dynamics with the example of Nubian-Egyptian claims to cultural autonomy and dignity amidst Egyptian nationalism, which has sidelined and erased Nubian identity as part of the Egyptian state narrative of anti-(European) colonialism. In doing so, Hassan points us toward the interdimensionality of decolonization struggle in a complex and messy world, appropriately using a contemporary case that

many in the US might not have been aware of. Hassan's piece also challenges us to consider how the use of decolonial narratives does not inherently make a political project liberatory, nor does the moral legitimacy of a decolonial narrative necessarily make it politically effective.

Decolonization is not only political but is a deeply personal process as well. In Pittsburgh, we are organizing a vibrant Jewish community where we struggle to take the fight against antisemitism, in which we have historically been the oppressed and exterminated, and the fight for Palestinian freedom and autonomy, in which we are the oppressor and colonizer, as part of the same historical fight for liberation. After the Tree of Life\*Or L'Simcha massacre, in which a white supremacist murdered 11 Jewish worshipers, may their memories be a blessing, we held each other in our trauma, and we stood steadfast in our commitment to resist Trump's attempt to co-opt our loss and redirect it to push the very same politics that inspired the attack. And at the very same time, we are unwavering in our resistance to those in our community who would weaponize our grief and use it to create more grieving Palestinian children, parents, siblings, comrades. Ami Weintraub's piece in this issue makes the internalization of these violences unavoidably vivid. Ami is a young revolutionary and rising spiritual leader in our Pittsburgh Jewish community, and I had asked them to contribute a piece to this issue based on a commentary they shared last year during Yom Kippur. Instead, they submitted a letter to me—to *us*, our respective names *Ami* (my people) and *Ben* (son) being double-meaningful in their Hebrew translations—about diasporic memory or forgetting of genocide and resistance. What do we collectively choose to remember? What have we been made to forget? And where do we put the pain of both? The heavy spaciousness

in Weintraub's essay pulls us toward precisely the type of reckoning that decolonization demands.

For Fanon, who was trained in Freudian psychology, the internal complexes resulting from colonial relationships begin and end with knowing and feeling, with power and sexuality. But Fanon only takes the analysis so far; despite his razor-sharp insight and revolutionary zeal, he does not interrogate the patriarchal foundations of colonial domination. Personalizing the language of decolonization can be risky, in that it has the potential to destabilize the political framework with specificity, but it is nevertheless essential to the internalization of decolonial logic. Diana Clarke's unflinchingly honest essay on sex, domination, and queer self-realization opens space for this interrogation, from the personal to the political and back. As Clarke writes, "decolonization means being in process"—they do not let us off the hook with easy answers, rather, they offer an intimate exploration of the ways that we can grapple with the colonial history that moves through our very bodies.

The proliferation of decolonial narratives in recent years is an important development, but at some point, the term "decolonization" is stretched too far (see Tuck and Yang 2012). Decolonization cannot be everything, because then it would mean nothing; it must always be grounded in the material-political struggles of the oppressed. But who is to say where this framework meets its limit? Brenda Peterson's piece challenges us to think beyond the bounds of our species. As Hassan's essay in this issue reminds us, the narrative of anti-colonialism can itself be used for colonial purposes from the perspective of others, but Hassan's is an essay on human struggle. Something about the human/non-human boundary feels palpably real to the point that it is insulting to the struggle of oppressed humans—many of whom

have been animalized as part of their oppression—to extend the decolonial narrative to non-human animals as though it is on par with the plight of human people. At the same time, as human-created climate change threatens to destroy millions of species and perhaps life on this planet altogether, is it really our place to constrain our liberatory discourses to humans? Of course, it is not humans *per se*, but particular humans in particular places who are driving climate crisis through neo-imperialism and corporate capitalism—but then again, many more of us participate, even to our ultimate detriment. In this light, Peterson’s piece prompts consideration.

At its core, decolonization pushes us to reexamine how we know the things we know and why. Readers must understand that one cannot read decolonial theory without an understanding of power. Decolonization has no meaning if one does not understand that the world is colonized—that colonial ways of seeing and knowing survived the ostensible fall of empires, and continue to affect many of the assumptions and common senses we hold dear. With that in mind, let us reflect on how we liberate ourselves and support one another. The pieces in this issue are intended to help spark conversation around that process. They are in no way comprehensive, but we hope they will add to the growing discussion of decolonization, and perhaps, to the struggle for a more just world. ●



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# Decolonization and Democratic Reasoning

STEPHEN L. ESQUITH

**“Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world.”**

– Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind*

**D**ECOLONIZATION IS A SEEMINGLY abstract theoretical term with a concrete historical origin. In Todd Shepard’s words, it was “invented” in the crucible of the Algerian War of Independence to describe a two-sided process in which Algeria gained its independence from France and France redefined its own national political identity in a more exclusionary way.<sup>1</sup>

Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, and others suggested that the liberation of colonized people also could lead to a transformation of the colonizer. Shepard quotes from Sartre’s 1961 preface to Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*: “we, too, people of Europe, we are being de-

colonized...let us look at ourselves, if we dare, and see what it makes of us” (p.10). According to Shepard, however, decolonization in practice did not have this kind of positive effect on the colonizers; instead, the term was used by Charles de Gaulle, who was forced to accept Algerian independence, to erase the memory of colonial violence, and to limit political citizenship in France based upon race and ethnicity (p.77).

In this article I explore decolonization in Mali, another former French colony in West Africa, where it represents the emergent way Malians have “perceived themselves and their relationship to the world”: partly divided geographically between North and South, partly unified religiously within a moderate Islamic faith, but still struggling to maintain control over new forms of political power as citizens with a single national identity over their differing ethnic identities.<sup>2</sup>

“Decolonization as democratic reasoning” replaces colonial forms of perception by shifting attention to how formerly colonized peoples think about the challenges they face and the local resources—language, culture, and tradition—they can enlist to meet them. In Mali, “decolonization as democratic reasoning” is taking shape through a hybrid process of “nongovernmentality” and “dialogue and reconciliation.”

## I. NONGOVERNMENTALITY

Rather than focusing on the usual questions about the state, its power, and its influence that typically occupy the attention of international relations specialists, there is another way to tell the story of decolonization that puts citizens at the center. Gregory Mann has given us one version of citizen-centered decolonization, which he calls “nongovernmentality.”

In *Empires to NGOs*, Mann looks beyond the familiar political formations that came into being at the end of colonial rule—new nation-states and ex-empires—to consider newly transnational communities of solidarity and aid, social science, and activism. In the two decades immediately after independence, precisely when its states were strongest and most ambitious, the postcolonial West African Sahel became a fertile terrain for the production of new forms of governmental rationality realized through NGOs. “I term this new phenomenon ‘nongovernmentality,’ and argue that although its roots may lie partly in Europe and North America, it flowered, paradoxically, in the Sahel.”<sup>3</sup>

Thinking nongovernmentally in general began in 1946. According to Mann, the object of this form of practical reasoning is society, not the state. Its initial focus was on the pre-Independence hierarchical relationships between Malians who occupied different roles under French colonial domination. Gradually, this gave way to other non-state and long-standing conflict relationships across Sahelian state borders,<sup>4</sup> and between clients on one side and humanitarian NGOs and human rights activists on the other. The alternative is a more democratic hybrid form of practical reasoning through dialogue and reconciliation, grounded in local traditional beliefs and practices and assisted in limited ways by locally run NGOs.

## II. DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION

Dialogue is not a means to reconciliation. Rather, dialogue and reconciliation are complementary sides of a way of reasoning collectively that potentially leads to a more inclusive democracy.

Let me begin with a few provisional definitions. Dialogue refers to the fact that democ-

racy requires that individuals engage in honest conversation with one another across their differences. Reconciliation refers to how the parties to serious dialogue approach one another when their past differences have led to deep conflicts and violence.<sup>5</sup> With these definitions in mind, we can outline the complementary process of dialogue and reconciliation in politically fraught situations.

### *Political Recognition and Political Forgiveness*

Political recognition requires the willing cooperation and mutual understanding of all parties if a continuing cycle of violence and revenge is to be avoided. This was the challenge facing the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.<sup>6</sup> Charles Villa-Vicencio, a leading member of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, stresses this new way of seeing what is at stake and for whom: “Reconciliation involves broadening the lens of peace building to find a way to move beyond a preoccupation with ‘me and my future’ to ‘us and our future.’”<sup>7</sup>

To achieve this future-oriented collective identity requires the difficult process of collective forgiveness. In a predominantly Muslim country such as Mali, Muslim principles can provide a political conception of forgiveness.

Russell Powell argues, “unlike the unilateral command to forgive in the Christian Gospels, the Qur’anic command to forgive is rooted in a vision of justice that requires reciprocity. In imitation of the Prophet, believers should forgive those who have not asked for forgiveness—even enemies.” The Qur’an describes believers as “those who avoid major sins and acts of indecencies and when they are angry they forgive.” We will forgive you now, whether you ask for it or not, because we realize that sooner or later we want you to forgive us, whether we

are wise or mature enough to ask for forgiveness ourselves.<sup>8</sup>

Political forgiveness does not preclude imposing sanctions. Unlike moral and religious forms of forgiveness in which there is a forgiver and the forgiven, reciprocal political forgiveness may include other alternatives to retribution such as restitution or reparations that do not depend upon individual guilt. They are forward-looking sanctions designed to repair the institutional damage that has been done.

### ***Knowing Forgetting***

The second facet of “reasoning through dialogue and reconciliation” is a kind of “knowing forgetting.” Unlike retributive justice (“an eye for an eye”), dialogue and reconciliation require that we recognize that however grievous the harm that has been done, there is no equivalent punishment that can be exacted. In fact, the greater the harm, the more absurd it is to think that by imposing a seemingly identical harm on the perpetrators, one has somehow righted the wrong.

“Knowing forgetting” does not mean forgetting the past completely, but rather remembering the past without letting it define our collective future options and choices completely. According to Albert Camus, one remembers so that one’s options are not restricted to being either an executioner or a victim.

### ***Apology and Acceptance***

Once initial political recognition, political forgiveness, and knowing forgetting have been thought through, one must decide when it is appropriate to demand an official apology even when one has forgiven in the political sense. In such cases an apology can restore confidence and trust. The next question then becomes what degree of leniency should be shown.

Should full amnesty be granted? Should reparations be paid or compensation be given?

These are complicated political judgments that will vary from case to case. As suggested above, they do not depend upon individual guilt. They are matters of shared and collective responsibility. In some cases, political forgiveness will be enough to allow “knowing forgetting” and political reconciliation to begin. In other cases, apology, acceptance, and limited amnesty may also be needed in order to sustain dialogue and reconciliation.

In other words, “democratic reasoning through dialogue and reconciliation” must begin with political recognition, political forgiveness, and an awareness that it is up to us how much the past will determine our future choices. Then, depending upon the particular situation, additional steps such as apology and acceptance, compensation, and reparations may be needed.

### ***Responsibility***

Whether they have been the victims of past acts of violence or alleged perpetrators, at a crossroads as significant as the one that Mali now finds itself, both sides have to seek political forgiveness, agree to forget knowingly what would otherwise unduly constrain them, and, where appropriate, accept apologies and consider leniency in order to move the process of dialogue and reconciliation forward. This is what is meant by reciprocity in the Qur’an. In Mali, this Islamic interpretation of reciprocity is particularly important, if dialogue and reconciliation are to be successful. But in addition to religious beliefs, traditional languages are also a critical part of decolonization as “democratic reasoning.”

In the language of the *bamana* people (bamanankan, the most commonly spoken language in Mali) the word for crossroads is

*dankun*, symbolized by the footprint of the dove: “X.” *Dankun* refers to a place in a forested area where the human world and the spirit world meet. It is in such a place that acts of self-sacrifice for the sake of others can occur. That is, where “us and our future” take precedence over “me and my future.”

Mali has entered such a crossroads in which what might otherwise feel unfair to those who believe they have suffered most must be understood in terms of “us and our future” as a people. Without this kind of reciprocity, the danger of falling back into civil war and brutal reprisals is all too real. Decolonization in this context means learning how to think through the process of dialogue and reconciliation in this complex way.

### III. HYBRID DECOLONIZATION

Since 2004 I have been involved in a series of peacebuilding projects in Mali; and since 2012 these projects have become more focused on dialogue and reconciliation in the complex sense described above. They bring together a partnership between several Malian community organizations, international NGOs, the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities (RCAH) of Michigan State University, and the Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako (ULSHB).

Right to Play (RTP) and the International Sports Alliance (ISA) are experienced INGOs led by a Malian staff that use sports and other games to help young people solve social problems and conflicts. RTP has a special emphasis on increasing the participation of young girls in civil society and public life by building confidence and competencies through sports. ISA has had a measurable impact on the development of young people in poor countries, including Mali. Both RTP and ISA have de-

veloped extensive “train the trainer” sessions (that include apprentices from ULSHB) so that they can adapt the picture books and the Peace Game (described below) to the specific situations they face in their villages. In addition to the problem of displaced ethnic groups that is pictured in *Ben Sigili/Faire la Paix*, the other three picture books deal with problems of youth poverty, the obstacles to education that young girls face, and the traumatic stress disorder of families that have been involved in military conflict.

The purpose of this partnership is to develop young leaders and resilient communities in which peace education is an integral part of schooling and civil society. The partners are doing this through a formative and community-based program of classroom activities, local recreation programs, neighborhood cultural activities, arts workshops, and civic dialogues. The classroom activities include the use and creation of challenging written materials in multiple languages, performance-based activities, and an active learning pedagogy. The cultural activities include sports and games, visual arts, performing arts, music concerts, and creative writing projects. Together these discursive practices embody the meaning of dialogue and reconciliation: political recognition and political forgiveness, knowing forgetting, apology and acceptance, and responsibility.

#### *Arts and Humanities*

The Malian NGO Institut pour l’Education Populaire (IEP) oversees its own multilingual and interdisciplinary K–9 community school, the Ciwara School. This has been the site for the creation and implementation of the first set of project materials (the picture books and the political simulation). Teachers from IEP and the Ciwara School, working closely with faculty and students from the Michigan State University Residential College in the Arts and Hu-



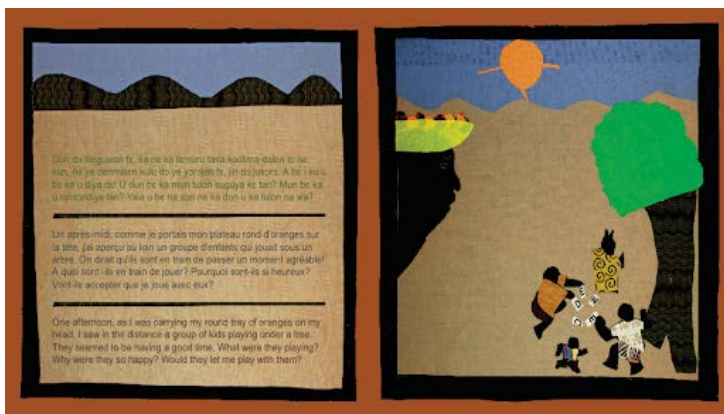
manities, also have developed a series of active learning techniques for music, dance, theater, comic art, and fabric art to help students and teachers interpret and apply the stories in these picture books to their own lives.

The dilemmas in the four peacebuilding picture books were written by IEP teachers and illustrated using local fabric and traditional iconography. One book, *Ben Sigili/Faire la Paix/Building Peace*, deals with the issue of displaced persons through dialogue and reconciliation. There is an audiobook version of *Ben Sigili/Faire la Paix* and now a video animation that is allowing teachers, coaches, and community organization leaders to use this book in more remote villages in Mali without an internet connection. One of the other books, *Koroboli/LeDefi/the Challenge*, tells the story of a young girl forbidden to attend school by her parents who need her to work at home. With the help of another girl who gives Fatoumata the courage to argue with her parents, she finally does attend school but discovers that after years of absence she faces another challenge. She is initially unable to keep up with the other students; the challenge continues.

## Sports and Games

In conjunction with the picture books, IEP teachers and students have developed a political simulation game, the Mali Peace Game, in which students learn how to use the practical reasoning skills they have been introduced to in the classroom through the picture books and in related co-curricular activities. The Peace Game revolves around a series of crisis scenarios written by the teachers, mirroring crises that they, their students, and their families have experienced since the 2012 coup d'état. These crises include environmental crises such as droughts and famines, labor crises such as strikes, refugee crises, and civil war. Students study the crises in their classes and then work through the scenarios in the simulation. The goal of the game is not for one side to prevail against others through violence but rather to find a path through dialogue and reconciliation, so that the conflicts between and within their fictional countries can be transformed non-violently and in a way that the least advantaged countries are not further disadvantaged by the compromises and negotiations that occur. Some of the main characters in the four picture books and the conflicts and dilemmas in the books are woven into the Peace Game.

It is through the Peace Game that the students, teachers, and adult audiences gain firsthand understanding of the constituent parts of dialogue and reconciliation. They learn what it means to be misrecognized and how hard it is to forgive. And in order to forgive, they learn that it does not require forgetting everything that has happened. And they learn that apologies can be hard to make but oftentimes just as hard to accept. Learning how to conduct this kind of demanding dialogue can be transformative, that is, it can prepare them to address the causes of their conflicts without resorting to violence.



On this page, Fatoumata looks on enviously as the other schoolchildren play a letter game together.

In this photograph, the members of one of the four countries in the Peace Game prepare for a negotiation session with the other three countries over a specific crisis scenario. Each country has a Prime Minister who speaks for the country in plenary sessions, but also has members in other government and non-government roles who discuss the crisis with their opposite representatives in other countries.

### ***Local Dialogue Forums***

Local dialogue forums provide opportunities for participants to discuss critically their ideas and questions about peace and civic responsibility among themselves and across generational and ethnic lines. This is where the skills of dialogue and reconciliation that they have learned in their readings and in the political simulation are put into real life practice.

Students and teachers invite adults and other young people to reenactments of parts of the Peace Game and dramatizations of the picture books in order to engage them in dialogue. The picture books and the Peace Game are not didactic. The stories and crisis scenarios are open-ended and raise dilemmas for further discussion. As such, they prepare the young people for these local dialogues in which they take the lead in framing the discussions and prompting critical reflection and possibly reconciliation.



Most local dialogues will be conducted in a face-to-face format. However, in order to bridge the gap between neighboring communities that are at odds with each other, a form of virtual dialogue is also possible. One example is the Mobil Dialogue Center designed by the Institut Malien de Recherche Action pour la Paix (IMRAP), the Malian office of the international NGO Interpeace. By filming separate dialogues and then screening them for the neighboring community, this technology allows them to listen and respond to each other without experiencing the tension that face-to-face contact sometimes creates.

## **IV. POLITICAL REALISM**

How realistic is this hybrid approach to decolonization that subordinates collaboration with NGOs and state educational institutions to the needs of community-based organizations?<sup>9</sup> Is it possible to change how people think about their collective identities when they are living through violent conflicts in dire circumstances and are dependent upon NGOs to the extent that they cannot avoid thinking nongovernmentally? This is the challenge that Mann's analysis poses for any attempt to cultivate democratic reasoning in the context of nongovernmentality.



One might argue that instead of trying to facilitate participation in local dialogue and reconciliation conversations independent of NGO influence, why not acknowledge the depths of their self-interested conflicts and turn to states and powerful NGOs to stop the fighting and rescue the victims? Wouldn't that be more realistic and have a greater chance of achieving some form of peaceful coexistence based on pragmatic reparations and carefully meted out retribution?

This is precisely what most transitional justice efforts seek to achieve through criminal tribunals and truth and reconciliation commissions. Unfortunately, these measures by themselves have not been sufficient, and in some cases, they arguably have heightened the conflicts. While there is strong resistance to the International Criminal Court, national criminal tribunals have struggled with the large number of cases before them. In Mali, after the French-led intervention in 2013, their own Commission for Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation attempted to bypass the International Criminal Court by combining restorative and retributive functions in one body. The result has been disappointing. Inter-ethnic violence has increased alongside terrorist attacks and violence by peacekeepers themselves in some cases.

The alternative that I am recommending, more long-term and local peacebuilding projects, not merely criminal punishments and civil penalties, is designed to address the challenge of decolonization as a form of democratic reasoning. It is a hybrid in the sense that it combines INGOs such as RTP and ISA with professional mediation within the context of local democratic peacebuilding with the help of IMRAP to assist local civil society organizations like the Ciwara School and the IEP to scale out their work to other communities. Such longer-term projects will have to rely on local languages, customs, and culture at the same time that

they draw upon the expertise of organizations like RTP, ISA, IMRAP and university researchers.<sup>10</sup>

Is this realistic? The philosopher Raymond Geuss has outlined a conception of realistic political theory that defends a view of political realism that may help us answer this question.<sup>11</sup> Such a theory should be concerned with institutionalized power, specifically, who controls it, in whose interests it operates, and at whose expense. Realism must look beyond the rationales that people offer for these institutions in order to identify their real motivations. Although Geuss is somewhat skittish about what he pejoratively calls applied ethical theory, a realistic theory must also inquire into the legitimacy of these institutions. How are they politically justified, not just on paper but in action? For this reason, it is normatively very different from the more common understanding of realism in politics, *realpolitik*.

According to Geuss, a realistic political theory will have to be conceptually innovative and capable of "orienting" people towards one another so that they feel at home in their world. An example of the former was Hobbes's concept of the state. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes provided new language for talking about the new forms of power that were emerging in the 17th century. The concepts of nongovernmentality and decolonization could play a similar role today. They help us see the power of some NGOs to shape perceptions more clearly. Our partnership in Mali illustrates how some NGOs in alliance with community organizations can play a legitimate role in decolonization by facilitating dialogue and reconciliation in the multi-dimensional senses defined above while avoiding governmentality.

As opposed to orienting young people around state institutions that have been hollowed out and disconnected from the body politic by

non-governmental organizations, our Malian partnership is designed to empower young people as participants in local dialogue forums *where they can work with, not at the behest of or under the control of NGOs*. They become oriented toward one another as participants in more democratic local political society so that they are prepared for the challenges posed by state and international NGOs. ●



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numerous articles, most recently on children's human rights, democratic political education, and peace building. He works with several local peacebuilding projects in Mali and similar peace education projects for refugee children in Michigan.

## Footnotes

[1] Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006). For an alternative, more complex and more global summary of decolonization, see Dane Kennedy, *Decolonization: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[2] According to the *Afrobarometer*, since 2011 just over 43–44% of Malians surveyed reported that they identified nationally as Malians and another 32–34% reported that they feel equally Malian and a member of an ethnic group. Only 14–20% over this eight year period in three *Afrobarometer* surveys reported that they felt either only members of their ethnic group or more ethnic than national in their political identity. <http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/analyse-online>.

[3] Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.2. Van de Walle and Bratton themselves have studied the role of NGOs and citizens in democratic transitions. See Nicolas van de Walle, "Foreign Aid in Dangerous Places: The Donors and Mali's Democracy," Working Paper No. 2012/61, United Nations University, <https://www.wider.unu.edu/publication/foreign-aid-dangerous-places-0> and the voluminous *Afrobarometer* public attitude surveys, 1999–2019, on democracy, governance, and society, <http://www.afrobarometer.org/> founded and directed by Bratton and his colleagues.

[4] For more details on the conflicts that have run through Northern Mali and across the Sahel prior to and before 1960, see Baz Lecocq, *Disputed Desert: Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms, and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010).

[5] Peter N. Stearns, ed., *Peacebuilding Through Dialogue: Education, Human Transformation, and Conflict Resolution* (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 2018).

[6] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), Chapter 7. Also, P. E. Digeser, *Political Forgiveness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[7] Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Walk with Us and Listen: Political Reconciliation in Africa* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), p.154.

[8] Russell Powell, "Forgiveness in Islamic Ethics and Jurisprudence," *4 Berkeley Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Law* 17 (2012).

[9] On the importance of "local realities" and hybrid models, see Alexander Laban Hinton, ed., *Transitional Justice: Global Mechanisms and Local Realities after Genocide and Violence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

[10] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language and African Literature* (Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 1986).

[11] Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).



# CLR James' Lessons to the World

PAUL BUHLE

**T**HIS SMALL ESSAY BEGINS ON A PERSONAL note. Publishing the New Left magazine *Radical America* in the later 1960s, I did my best to introduce C.L.R. James to a new generation of radicals. As the years passed, I solicited the first collection of essays about his life, and then wrote the authorized biography. I could not be objective if I wanted to be. James remains, in my mind, a totemic left-wing thinker of the twentieth century, in the company of W.E.B. Du Bois and not many others.

James (1901-1989) had a most unique life, intimately connected with the great decoloni-

zation process of the twentieth century. Sadly, his life is also connected with the unsuccessful struggle against the drastic economic and strategic recolonization that has torn away so much of the promise of impoverished people taking their history into their own hands.

The son of a village schoolteacher in Trinidad, himself a teacher there during the 1920s, James joined an independence movement that led him to a lifetime calling. In London of the 1930s, he became part of an anti-colonialist circle of exiles from Asia and Africa, and set himself to write a world-historic volume, *The Black Jacobins* (1938) about the successful

rising of slaves in what would become Haiti, against the colonial masters.

People of color, heretofore regarded as passive victims at best, became the masters of their own destiny. W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* appeared the year before, with a similar message that slaves had struggled to undo slavery and joined in the great effort to democratize the South, and American society at large, in the decider after the Civil War.

These two volumes, recognized belatedly in the 1960s and 1970s to be two unique classics among all histories written in the English language, had actually pointed the way forward to the anti-colonial uprisings that accelerated across the Third World after 1945. Du Bois had become a Communist, in pursuit of Russian support for these revolts, while James became a Trotskyist, convinced (as he wrote in later years about his friend of the 1930s, singer-activist Paul Robeson) that the other two black giants had made a fundamental error but an error understandable in the absence of any other world organization actually providing material aid to the anti-colonialists.

James warned and led activists across several continents in working against the bureaucratization of the independence struggles, the loss of the dynamic of popular support that could, alone, stave off the return of the chains of dependence in new guise: the world market. Had he somehow lived another twenty years, James would have seen clearly the ecological consequences of mineral extraction, mono-crop agriculture and all the rest of the planet-wounding globalization.

But this is not to dismiss the importance of struggles along the way.

**James found himself constantly recalculating a strategy for liberation that would carry the anti-colonialist societies forward into a participatory democracy...**

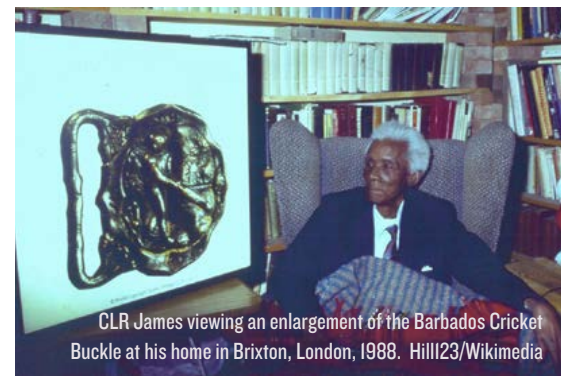
James found himself constantly recalculating a strategy for liberation that would carry the anti-colonialist societies forward into a participatory democracy (to use later terminology) or “socialism

from below.”

We can best understand James's contributors from his work with those radical movements closest to his influences. He saw around his English-speaking Caribbean the emergence of political leaders who drew directly upon the enthusiasm of the masses.

In Trinidad above all, his erstwhile protege, Caribbean historian and political leader, Eric Williams, had created the utterly unofficial “University of Woodford Square” in downtown Port of Spain, where Williams among others would speak to ordinary urbanites and engage with them in discussions far outside of the ruling colonial government. Across the region the example spread, although on some islands the national leaders found other routes and sometimes a British colonial office almost eager to give formal power over to them.

The case of Ghana was more crucial to world politics and more tragic. James maintained his connection with leader Kwame Nkrumah through correspondence, and by efforts of James's other devotees in Africa, who reported back to him in person and by letter. James's volume *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* illuminates the drama. The masses lifted Nk-



CLR James viewing an enlargement of the Barbados Cricket Buckle at his home in Brixton, London, 1988. Hill123/Wikimedia

rumah up as the foremost anti-colonial figure of Africa, but the economic pressure of Britain, and the influence of a suddenly bureaucratizing political party around Nkrumah, turned the leader into a repressive, near-dictatorial figure until his fall from power at the hands of the military and its Western backers. What remained was neocolonialism back in power, an example that has repeated itself again and again and continues to do so, most painfully perhaps in South Africa.

James personally returned home to Trinidad, at Eric Williams's appeal, to edit the newspaper of the Progressive National Movement, *The Nation*. Notwithstanding the collaboration of his wife, Selma James, he lasted less than two years in the post. The PNM, in post-colonial power the Progressive National Party, froze him out, which is to say the party bureaucracy did not truly want the *participation* of ordinary people in the government. Thanks to oil resources, Williams survived politically but here, too, neocolonialism took over.

There is no simple lesson here. James ardently supported the cause of the Vietnamese against the invading Americans, never mind that the revolution was led by a Communist force dependent upon Moscow.

Likewise, he extended his support to Guyanese leader Cheddi Jagan, overthrown by the CIA for rhetorical support of Russia and Cuba, while also embracing the more radical opposition in Guyana led by his disciple Walter Rodney. James likewise embraced the short-lived revolutionary government in Grenada, led by a self-declared disciple, this one murdered

by Soviet-leaning hardliners. He also continued to support the Cuban Revolution, to the end of his life, as a potential turning point in his native Caribbean, no matter its faults and limitations.

To get rid of colonialism was the first project in James's view, but this could not be done effectively without the full participation of the masses. Afterward, it was the task of the national leadership to help create a society in which socialism would be a natural result.

This is not by any means the entirety of James's legacy for today's visionary-activists. *Beyond a Boundary* (1962) is now seen as a classic study of popular sport from Antiquity to the mid-twentieth century through a case study of cricket. How is that possible? Because people of color, young James himself included, came to see "we are as good as they," overcoming their own self-doubts through non-whites' triumphs in sports. Late in life, James looked to black women's novels and poetry as expressing the fresh possibilities of freedom. Culture, in short, was never separate from human possibilities, and popular culture never far from the Shakespeare that he venerated.

Go forth, he often said to young people, realize yourself, your creative potential, and in doing that, give your collective struggle new sources of strength. That is surely the lesson of C.L.R. James for the twenty-first century. ●



Image courtesy Europeana/Wikimedia  
Toussaint L'Ouverture is a central figure in James's telling of the Haitian Revolution



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# The Decision of Decolonization: The Nubian Case, Tactics, and Strategies

**HATEM M HASSAN**

**I**N THE INITIAL MOMENTS OF RAPID STATE AND social transformation—the complete reimagining of what is (or is no longer) possible—political entities and groups with histories may come together in order to demand the downfall of a country’s ruler, the end of widespread police brutality, or comprehensive reform of corrupt government institutions. Patriotism—the support of a nation through practices and belief systems sustained by the

production of symbols (flags, style of dress, songs) and their communication—is present during such instances, but it is geared towards an ideal state or government. Once the principal objective is achieved, this enthusiasm turns into something very different. In Egypt, for example, a history of European and American imperialism fostered a great deal of paranoia of foreign meddling during and following mass protests in 2011. Revolutionaries, reformists,



and reactionaries alike feared division within the nation as Libyan and Syrian civil wars caused unprecedented displacement and death in the years to come. The interest of international journalists and celebratory observers from western nations feels like voyeurism. The emergence, in 2013, of an authoritarianism so openly antagonistic towards difference, creativity, and critical expression was said to be the cost of stability and promised as a path towards internal coexistence. Egyptian President El-Sisi's nationalist rhetoric attempted to include the usually ignored groups: he promised to protect Egypt's Coptic Christian population (about 10 percent of the total population, or 10 million) from militant attacks, but used paternalistic language. Nubians were acknowledged in the 2014 constitution, with a return to their land being mentioned for the first time in written word, but military occupations ignored the plan. These moments and fears of internal division by some of the population tend to minimize different political interests, especially those of minority groups and those pertaining to land struggles (since government responds to internal strife with a military logic of securing its domestic territory).

Moments of rapid state transformation—ones accompanied or reinforced by nationalism—offer an opportunity to understand some of the obstacles of decolonization, especially in the Nubian people's dilemma during the tumultuous years following the revolution. Post-revolutionary regimes use symbols to stress the importance of self-sacrifice and forget real grievances and massacres of older generations. Moments of political rupture and state transition—and growing political and social divisions throughout the historical process—require groups to reconsider decolonization as a set of strategic decisions. The decision of decolonization too is an individual one because it causes individuals to confront temptations to assimilate,

late, whether due to patriotism or remembering the obstacles that their ancestors faced.

## MAKING INDIGENOUS PATRIOTIC: THE DECISION OF COLONIZATION

On October 9 2017, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (2013– ) presented civilian Ahmed Edris with a medal of honor for his work during the 1973 October War in an auditorium filled with decorated military officials and political figures. A Nubian resident of the southern Egyptian city of Aswan, Edris was critical to coding the military's communication during the seven-day battle. In the face of Israel's knowledge of Arabic, Edris suggested that military leaders use the indigenous Nubian dialects (*Kunooz* and *Fadika*), spoken in southern (upper) Egypt and Northern Sudan. The language is passed down through oral history and Nubian leaders and activists express real concerns for the language's survival. The language is known to few outside upper Egypt and northern Sudan. During the ceremony, Edris told the president of the republic, "I've been silent for forty years," to which el-Sisi responded: "I now will reward you."

A member of the Nubian population in Egypt, Edris used the indigenous language to help Egypt secure the Sinai peninsula. The culture of a population whose displacement threatened its very survival, and whose grievances have been ignored since the construction of the Aswan High Dam, was critical to national land victory over Israeli occupation of its land. To be Nubian in that moment was to be displaced by one's country and subsequently to work towards it acquiring more territory and regional influence. The irony is disturbing but not at all uncommon. For example, the U.S. military benefited greatly from enlisting African American men (e.g., Tuskegee Airmen) and women

in the Second World War at a time when Jim Crow laws limited their freedom at home; from indigenous tribes' engagement in the Civil War; and from arming Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq without offering any form of recognition of a Kurdish state. Returning to Egypt, Ahmed Edris on October 9, 2017 was invited by el-Sisi to be *both* indigenous and patriotic. This was not entirely unintentional, given the reemergence of the Nubian movement's call to return to their lands the year prior. Government recognition of the indigenous patriot is an attempt to absorb the Nubian people's exceptional and longer history within the nation during a highly symbolic event, claim it as their own past, and continue military projects on their ancestors' lands. Partial recognition creates internal tension within communities torn between realism and idealism of the Nubian return to land.

The Nubian population has recently begun debating the usage of status to describe their his-



Trump meeting with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Image courtesy of the White House/Flickr.

torical position in relation to Egypt. Very few discuss the process of returning to their land as decolonization, and this is peculiar given the

British impetus for nation-building projects that continue to affect them. This is peculiar, too, given the well-known ancient lineage of the population—which precedes Arab, Muslim, Coptic, Ottoman, and European presence on the land.

## RACIALIZATION AND INDIGENEITY OF NUBIAN IDENTITIES

Decolonization refers to the reclamation of physical and political space to reverse the coercive economic and cultural transformation of a population. Since colonization often entails a reduction of the population into a homogeneous native group, decolonization aims to reintroduce the actual complexity of indigenous experiences. It requires collectively remembering a history of foreign occupation by paying attention to the physical, legal, racial, and economic manifestations that still live with us today. It involves invoking a history of original peoples, overseers, or owners of a land; demonstrating a violence committed to those original peoples by an aggressor(s); and linking land return or reclamation to not only mere survival (access to food, water, and shelter) but economic, social, and cultural revitalization. If decolonization is a tactic and story that we tell ourselves—one that could intentionally be chosen by indigenous and other populations but with careful determination—then we must take into account the possible ways that others react to such a frame.

The Nubian population of Upper (southern) Egypt, typically darker skinned than northerners, have faced the largest internal, physical displacement of a population within the nation's modern history, despite having ancestors who belong to one of the world's oldest civilizations. Forced migration is tied to both British rule and the rise of the postcolonial Egyptian

state under Gamal Abdel Nasser's presidency (1954–1970). Beginning with the British-led construction of the Aswan Low Dam in 1902, two subsequent reconstructions of the dam in 1912 and 1932–3, and the 1963–4 high dam displacement in Abu Simbel (lake Nasser) more than 50,000 Nubians have been displaced from nearly 50 villages. Displacement suggests that the most jarring and violent experience is the physical removal of land, but the loss of collective memory (because the Nubian language is oral) and preservation of community that are a result of this original aggression are the issues being fought over by younger Nubians today.

Nubian elders who experienced the completion of the Aswan High Dam—and who witnessed the flooding in the 1960s and 1970s—preserve histories of resettlement (to Nom Ombo) by sharing them with younger Nubians. From this generation came a network of domestic and international Nubian clubs, which largely function as social service organizations. Historically, these groups have intentionally refrained from issuing demands or critiques against the state, especially on matters related to indigenous recognition. The reluctance of cultural organizations to engage in risky political demands should not suggest that narratives of displacement and official-legal recognition have not transferred across time. Following the construction of the Aswan High Dam, authors like Zeki Murad, Muhammad Khalil Qasim,

Idris Ali, and Yahya Mukhtar came to represent a literary generation that focused primarily and explicitly on the collectively experienced (traumatic) events of their generation. Idris Ali's *Dongola: A Novel of Nubia* (1993), for example, depicts the Egyptian state as a colonial

force which extracts cultural and physical resources from the Nubian community (e.g., ancient ruins, the Nile river, pharaonic legacy, etc.). Very little has been documented on the post-Dam mobilization of the Nubian community, but forced “Arabization” indicates the state's concern with its internally distinct group.

If we look at the racialization of Arab and Nubian populations, we begin to see that the latter has been treated as anything but a homogeneous portion of the national citizenry. The paragon of pan-Arabism in the mid-twentieth century, Gamal 'Abdel Nasser (President of Egypt, 1954–1970)—as well as the cultural renaissance in Egypt simply referred to as *al-Nahda* (the awakening), and resistance against Ottoman hegemony—was central to the formation of the Arab as a contemporary racial category. Nasser's nationalization projects led to the coerced evacuation of non-natives, the native-Egyptian Jewish community, and dispersed Nubians across the country. Pan-Arabism, itself a response to European colonial hegemony, asserted anti-imperialism precisely through its claim as the authentic heir to Egyptian land and descendants of some original inhabitants. But quickly—and we are reminded of this during

Nubians as seen by Frederic Caillaud, who entered Sudan together with the Egyptian invasion force in 1820. Image courtesy of Wikimedia.



the mid-twentieth century, when native rulers adopted the colonial apparatus left by its European engineers to lead post-independence authoritarianisms—land management, encroachment, and evacuation became an issue whose main tension emerged between nationalism and heterogeneity of Egypt’s population (as a more-than-Arab place).

Colonization and the formation of white supremacy are not part of a single historical phenomenon, mutually reinforcing as the two often are. Racial formation, far from concretizing categories that are historically durable, dramatically shifted during the mid-twentieth century in Egypt, where explicitly anti-racist and anti-imperialist rhetoric of Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser provided the framework to reaffirm Arab identity in North Africa while aligning with other African and American independence struggles. The forms of racism in Egypt cannot be understood through U.S. or European anti-blackness. Though many Nubians do not consider the Egyptian nationality in conflict with their former identity, rampant bigotry and violence from Northern Egyptians—especially in popular media’s representation of them as doormen and housekeepers—socially and politically isolate them. Some landlords in Cairo—and this is through my personal observation—do not rent apartments to Nubians or Sudanese couples or families. Though marginalization of Nubians is distinct from and relatively limited when compared to the marginalization of Somali or Ethiopian immigrant communities in Cairo, Arab identity since the *Nahda* (renaissance) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries never attempted to reckon with Nubians who found themselves on the Egyptian side of the border with Sudan. This distinction, in part, informs Nubians’ ambivalence to adopting indigenous and colonization frameworks as a tactic. Nationalism and moments of state instability change the relation-

ship that Nubians from other countries have with the majority Arab-Muslim population, but it can also become a chance to gain formal recognition and state rights that have been denied through their racialization.

## DECIDING DECOLONIZATION IN NUBIAN YOUTH STRATEGY

When a state and population finds itself in a moment of rapid transformation—when populations remove, replace, or dismantle their existing governing apparatus—the decolonization effort of an indigenous population may have opportunities to emerge or adapt. But it also reveals something distinct about tactical usage of decolonization and associated concepts. Whereas decolonization in the contemporary artistic community in Cairo—which is often funded by or features European natives—speaks to a specific suspicion against foreign-led neo-imperial projects, for example, there is no clear indication that Nubian populations position themselves in relation to European influence (despite the original effects of systemic discrimination by the British and Ottoman empires). A decision to understand one’s future through decolonization does not always require explicit, verbally articulated sentiments against European occupation, violence, and extraction. The focus tends to lock onto the immediate



Modern Nubian architecture: ornately decorated gate. Image courtesy of Clemens Schmillen/Wikimedia.

repression from Egypt's ruling groups.

Limiting the use of decolonization to matters of land, indigeneity, imperialism, and occupation—and avoiding the use of decolonization metaphorically to be able to talk about the infinite ways that white supremacy manifests itself in our everyday lives—could allow us to understand how the historical process manifests itself differently at the local level and how these local variations come into conflict with transnational discourses. In the U.S. context, colonization most often refers very specifically to the occupation of Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America (until the mid-twentieth century); European land seizures from and removal of indigenous peoples in what are now known as the Americas; and human genocide and enslavement that accompanied them both. Colonization in, say, Egypt refers more to French and British, rather than Ottoman, occupation. Decolonization here is primarily anti-imperial and anti-European (avoiding anglicized words in everyday language, emphasizing Islamic over European architecture in Cairo, etc.); in the U.S., it is tactically used to address white supremacy, privatization of land, and monopoly on knowledge production (e.g., universities, hospitals, and the legislative branches of government being the sole producers of truth)—to name only a few of its targets. (De)colonization unfolds unevenly across geography. This becomes relevant when we ask how local strategies interact with the international discourse on the human rights of indigenous groups.

Young segments of indigenous groups have established transnational ties, both symbolic and social. Nubian organizers began an online solidarity campaign with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe during the 2016-7 Dakota Access Pipeline protests. In both the 1960s construction of the Aswan High Dam in Upper Egypt and the 2016-7 completion of the Dakota

Access Pipeline in the U.S., actual and future displacement of native populations were seen by each government as a necessary tradeoff for energy resources, a sacrifice for the nation. And both endangered the spiritual and physical relationship of indigenous populations to the land, now at risk for environmental degradation. The Egyptian and U.S. governments use a logic of development (building roads, creating energy for consumption, etc.) to justify indigenous displacement as a mere cost of state growth.

Movements that build borderless networks of international groups and supporters from economically and politically powerful nations sometimes boomerang back to pressure a national government to concede (at least partially). This was the case, for example, when international pressure caused Egypt's "democratic opening" of civil society in the 2000s, which would lead to movement-building responsible for the 2011 revolutionary moment. Nubian groups, such as Nubian Democratic Youth Union (NDYU), led by younger generations, as well as the Nubian (social) Clubs of Awan, Cairo, Suez, and Alexandria (among others), have grappled with the question of positioning the struggle as one of citizens' rights and the right to return. The latter of the two has been controversial because of the strategic narrative weaving of the Nubian and Palestinian struggle, a fabric that many Nubians wish to unravel to maintain their authenticity as an Egyptian, localized movement. Renowned Nubian activist Haggag Oddoul received negative media attention and community responses by both the older Nubian community in Egypt and the state in 2005 after he attended a "Freedom and Democracy in the Middle East" conference in Washington D.C. to discuss the the Egyptian state's violence toward the Nubian community. Manal el-Tibi, head of Egyptian Center for Housing Rights, went to transnational human

rights and legal entities in 2010 to place pressure on the regime, but only after organizing a conference in 2007 that was met with threats and censorship by the Egyptian government. Aligning the Nubian narrative with other indigenous struggles to return to their land has thus far yielded little for young and old Nubian citizens of Egypt. An interview with a Nubian activist reflects on this sentiment:

“Would we lose more than we benefit if we framed our demands as an indigenous people... What happened after the declaration of indigeneity? Nothing. We need more than recognition. More than papers.”<sup>1</sup>

Framing the Nubian return to land as a transnational issue linked to other indigenous struggles yielded little for organizations and the broader movement in the 1990s and 2000s, but continuing solidarity with Amazigh people (Maghreb), Palestinians, Black Lives Matter protests, and indigenous peoples at Standing Rock through online solidarity campaigns continues to matter to a handful of Nubian activists. International networks of alliances—especially those online—do not need to be massive to effectively spread in moments of heightened political conflict.

## COLONIZATION AS ELIMINATING DIFFERENCE

Just as colonial states do not simply appear and psychologically, socially, and economically transform a population, decolonization is not simply about a collective body of individuals who oppose some other grouping of colonizers. That these new post-independence, indigenous rulers—who identify with the rest of the population—choose to perpetuate unpopular institutions despite their undoubtedly foreign origins is no accident. Especially in places where no pre-existing modern state had existed,

colonization introduces a geographic area and population into a global arena (international financial markets; loans for building new roads, electrical grids, etc.) which recognizes its new statehood. It introduces a population to new desires, some of which are embedded in the rights of citizens (private property, freedom of speech, etc.). In places such as the Middle East and Africa where the formal apparatuses of states remain in flux and civil strife is highly likely, decolonization must tactically represent itself as something other than the destruction of state institutions or else a population seeking stability will look elsewhere.

Nubian organizers have had some recent success when framing land return as a domestic struggle. The 2008 bread crisis initiated by a general strike in Egypt and the 2011 mobilizations against the police allowed Nubian people to align their struggle with larger national goals. The removal of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohammed Morsi by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi—now Egypt’s military leader—was followed by the 2014 constitution. Article 236 was recognized as a triumph: for the first time in the nation’s modern history, the Nubian population was explicitly mentioned and given a ten-year timeline for the return of their land.

Success was limited, even when the struggle was framed as a domestic one: The framework of decolonization can prove, *especially during revolutionary moments*, to be ineffective—true as it may feel to frame one’s struggle as such, as historically accurate as it may be. This is because such moments motivate populations to emphasize their shared interests (against some economic or political grievance such as corruption in the courts, abuse of the presidency, growing class disparity, etc.). Once a leader is ousted, or government reforms commence, coalitions and groups that momentarily align with one another begin to compete for institutional power within the new government.

Meanwhile, sustained protests by groups who feel underrepresented by the recent political developments are met with accusations of disrupting the national economy or threatening national unity. In Egypt, many began distinguishing between the “real revolutionaries” that helped

oust president Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011) and those who went out in the streets in the years to follow, who were often called *baltajiyya* (thugs). Many blamed political instability for the inflation of staple foods (rice, sugar, wheat), near collapse of tourism, everyday petty theft, and declining international investment. Between 2012 and 2016, I’d even hear conspiracies that Egypt was being intentionally divided into various, smaller geographic entities. Fear of civil war was all too real for Egyptians who saw former nations in the region disintegrate. It is in this political climate that a much needed Nubian movement was making their claims to return to their land. They had to do so in a way that reminded both the Egyptian state and the remainder of the population of their national pride.

In 2017 and 2018, sustained campaigns and the growth of groups such as the Nubian Knights youth collective were met with accusations and fierce repression, such as the death of notable organizer Gamal Sorour after being jailed and deprived of his medication. Two presidential decrees secured the preservation and management of military zones—territo-



2011 Egyptian protests: Friday of Departure: Tahrir Square. Image courtesy of Mona Sosh/Wikimedia.

ries that just so happened to be in the place of fourteen Nubian villages. As expected, the regime juxtaposed nationalism to the population’s heterogeneity. In a 2017 youth conference in Aswan, el-Sisi suggested that national and Nubian survival are one in the same:

“My aim in these meetings is not to give any chance to people who incite strife and cause problems within the state... I’m very much aware of the current problems, as I have discovered that there is someone telling the people of Nubia that the country is not granting them their rights.”

Responding to el-Sisi, Nubian leaders of the community quickly framed the struggle as one of development rather than indigeneity, centering their populations’ housing requests and employment as central to national progress, following much lamented revolutionary instability. In part, this was to avoid political repression towards a Nubian community of activists, but it was also to align Nubian interests with the general course of post-revolutionary Egypt. The reframing was not successful. Land promised by the el-Sisi in 2016 was later sold for a

new national mega-project. But the narrative of development that was proposed has long fit the Nubian situation: displacement of the Nubians was, after all, due to the construction of the Aswan High Dam, which provides just under fifteen percent of the country's electricity. Development of the nation in the past has come at the direct expense of the Nubian population so choosing this over indigeneity worked only because it was familiar. The hope by some more conservative Nubian elders was that this time development would be in their favor—a hope that quickly evaporated.

Forms of government (authoritarianism, liberalism, etc.) and the conversations occurring within the international community simultaneously shape what is possible from understanding one's struggle through decolonization. The durability of modern colonial projects is precisely in states' capacity to establish an intimate relationship with the population it wishes to exploit, encroach upon, remove, or wipe out. In the case of indigenous groups, it needs to isolate them from the international community. Nubian activists decided on decolonization in a moment of state instability that was followed by ultra-nationalism. One feature of the latter is the spread of patriotism as a social measure of intimacy. But for historically distinct ethnic, racial, and religious groups, intimacy in those moments comes in the form of surveillance wrapped in a cloak of cultural preservation. British rule in Egypt and American influence in Iran, for example, promoted and claimed to preserve the native legacy but only in museums and architecture. Nubian youth, individuals, organizers, and families are deprioritized while their ancient relics are preserved and showcased as a source of *national* pride. This may be reminiscent, to the reader, of the award ceremony for Ahmed Edris mentioned at the introduction, where he was rewarded by military rulers only by secur-

ing territory for Egypt while the country took the land of his family, friends, and ancestors.

The Nubian return to land along the Nile threatens Egypt's current authoritarian grip not because their struggle would devastate the military's strategic position but because it introduces more complexity to an increasingly politically and socially heterogeneous population. And this is not, of course, particular to Egypt. Patriotic belief can accept coexistence among a superficially diverse population, but real difference in political demands, cultural practices, racial and religious discrimination, and history of government displacement make state-building projects more difficult in a historically divided nation. More than three decades of organizing by indigenous groups globally introduces serious challenges to increasingly nationalist, insular governments. There is a reason why Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is so threatened by "his" population talking to the international community. But that this tension—to label one's struggle as decolonial—is never resolved should not suggest that the strategic usage of (trans)national decolonization cannot continue to eat away at a patriotism that eliminates the possibility of indigenous (or just heterogeneous, for that matter) existence.



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#### Footnotes

[1] Interview conducted by legal scholar, Maja Janmyr.



# The Decolonization of Black Cinema

KENNETH W. HARROW

**W**HEN I WAS A FULBRIGHT LECTURER in Senegal in 2005–2006, I was asked to give a lecture on the relationship between African American and African cinema.

There is no obvious reason why these two bodies of film should be directly related. However, to my surprise I did discover parallels that suggested something more than coincidences. It seems that the trajectory along which the decolonization of these respective cinemas passed contained remarkable similarities. This paper will trace the passage from “colonized” to “decolonized” of the two sides of “black” cinema, recognizing that there were other regions of the world where African diaspora cinema was also created, and decolonized, such as Caribbean or European diaspora cinemas. The fascinating story here is of the two major bodies of film, African and African American, whose historical paths toward liberation were, not incidentally, matched by similar paths in the world of cinema.

## THE COLONIAL PERIOD: 1885–1960

In the first half of the 20th century, the distribution and exhibition of cinema in Africa was subject to colonial censorship, and I am not aware of black American cinema being shown in Africa at that time. Colonial films, like *Sanders of the River* (Zoltan Korda, 1935; with Paul Robeson as Bosambo), which were made in Africa, would normally not find distribution in

Africa, though eventually Hollywood and grade B films came to be shown. Colonial film units began to make documentaries with British or Belgian directors, and showed films to Africans as educational tools. However, no entertainment films made by African Americans were likely to have ever been shown.

Yet film industries did exist in the United States that were producing films intended for black audiences, and when we consider the larger trajectory of the creation of black films in Africa and in the United States, it is not too much to say that they were subject to similar colonial forces, and produced bodies of films that ultimately went through massive changes that paralleled each other. They passed from being colonial to decolonized films, and it took practically a century for this to occur.

Cinema was born in 1895, when the Lumière brothers held their first screening of projected motion pictures in Paris. This occurred thirty years after the end of the American Civil War, less than twenty years after Congress ended Reconstruction (1877), at a time when the systematic denial of African American rights was spreading. Lynchings began around 1881, though there were race riots in 1876, the year before Reconstruction ended. 3,500 African Americans died in lynchings, primarily over the period of 1881–1952. Both lynchings and repressive legislation represented attempts by Southern racists to control and limit African American participation in political, social, and economic life. Control over public images

was part of similar processes, even popular postcards from the era depict grizzly images of lynchings.

In Berlin in 1885, Europeans agreed to divide up the territory of the continent. The major colonizers on the continent, until then, were the British and the French, and, secondarily, the Portuguese. In 1886, the most celebrated figure of military resistance to the French, Lat Dior, was conquered and killed, ten years after Senegal was declared a colony. During this period, the Muslim leadership in West Africa was being conquered, and exiled. Thus the birth of cinema in 1895 coincided with the colonial conquest of Africa.

With the commercial and political domination of Africa came the rise of ethnography and social Darwinism, and the attempt to define race in “scientific” terms that rationalized the underlying beliefs in racial superiority of Europeans. Most notorious was Arthur de Gobineau whose *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853–55) expressed the dominant view of his age. De Gobineau held that there were three human races (black, white, and yellow), divided according to natural inherent traits, and further claimed that the mixing of races would lead to the collapse of culture and civilization. The racism that pervaded the ethnography of the 1880s marked the Exposition of 1900 in Paris, which also happened to feature the Lumière brothers’ first screening of film on a large screen. At the same exposition Africans were exhibited as “natives” in native habitat, dressed for gawking crowds who observed them in their ethnographic exhibition areas.

The late 19th century saw Europeans financing expeditions to explore and map, explain, display, and subjugate the continent, militarily, politically, and economically. The conquest of Africa was psychological as well as physical; it

included the reproduction of photos, with massive numbers of postcards being produced, along with newspaper drawings, and finally moving images. The rise of commercial cinema in 1900–1940 corresponded with the expansion of the colonial system.



## POST-RECONSTRUCTION AND THE AMERICAN PARALLELS TO COLONIAL CINEMA: 1880s-1920s

The development of racist ideologies and institutionalized segregation in the U.S. in the years following Reconstruction (1863–1877) came at the same time as the onset of European colonialism in Africa, and both occurred more or less simultaneously with the production of racially denigrating representations of Africans and African Americans. African Americans faced the same attitudes as did Africans and other colonized peoples who experienced conquest, domination, the expropriation of their property and rights, and the implementation of discriminatory legal practices (Young 2003). Africans were depicted by Europeans in stereotypical fashion as having tails, and as savage or barbarian; terms that were used to express this included “uncivilized,” “non-évolués,” “indigene,” or “pagan.” They were seen as closer to animals and represented as a violent, over-sexualized subhuman population. This degrading view was embodied in the first major American film, D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. That year there were 56 documented lynchings in the United States.

Colonialist films of the early 20th century matched American stereotypes of blacks, detailed here by Frank Ukadike:

Typifying the ideological governance of the period, films such as *The Wooing* and *Wedding of a Coon* (1905), *The Kings of the Cannibal Islands* (1908), *The Slave* (1909), *The Sambo Series* (1911), *Missionaries in Dark-est Africa* (1912), *Voodoo Vengeance* (1913), and *The Terrors of the Jungle* (1913), are some among the numerous others that reassert the established notion of white superiority over non-whites whose deeds provided laughable comic relief for the amusement of Western spectators. Daniel Leab notes that “between 1890 and 1915 the movie black, whether played by a white or not, and whether presented as an uneasy menace, a dancing machine, a comic stooge, a faithful retainer, a cheerful flunky, a tainted unfortunate, or an ignorant savage was presented as a composite of qualities that were the opposite of values treasured by white American society.” (“Western Film Images of Africa.” *The Black Scholar*: 21.2, March–April–May 1990: 30–48.)

*Tarzan of the Apes* (Scott Sidney) appeared in 1918. One year later came two South African films based on H. Rider Haggart’s 1887 novel *King Solomon’s Mines*.<sup>1</sup>

## COLONIALISM AND RESISTANCE TO COLONIALISM IN AFRICA AND THE UNITED STATES: EARLY BLACK CINEMA - 1910s–1940s

Forms of resistance emerged in Africa simulta-

neous to this development of colonial and racist thought reflected in film. Military resistance was to be found in regions of North Africa and in West Africa, with such figures as Umar Tall and Lat Dior. Political resistance in South Africa came with the formation of the African National Congress in 1912, and in the U.S. with the formation of the NAACP in 1909. That major modes of resistance in the U.S., South Africa, and Senegal occurred at the same time indicates an important feature of the historical record, and how resistance to racial politics had correspondences across much of the world.

African traders and politicians competed with whites along the Senegal and Niger Rivers and in the Congo. Early Senegalese politicians included Blaise Diagne, the first African deputy to the French national assembly in 1914. In the 1930s, black African and Caribbean intellectuals and poets created the Negritude movement. Negritude poetry and literature contained narratives in which images of Africans now appeared as beautiful women, dancers, proud people, warriors, or powerful ancestors whose influence could not be destroyed by colonialism.

By the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance in the U.S. generated similar counter-hegemonic discourses. Coalitions of left-wing, progressive activists and intellectuals opposed colonial, racist practices (Young 2003). The NAACP led the struggle against showings of *Birth of a Nation*, called for nationwide boycotts, and succeeded in stopping its distribution in some instances.<sup>2</sup> The NAACP also called for films with positive depictions of African Americans. There were some attempts to do so, as with *Birth of a Race* (1918), and finally with the development of Race Films in the 1920s.



Africans were barred from directing their own films during the colonial period. They did work, however, for the British Colonial Film Units, which produced colonial films from the 1940s on, beginning in Ghana (then called Gold Coast). The first film produced in West Africa was made by the British director Sean Graham (*Amenu's Child*, 1949), followed by many others—the most famous being *The Boy Kumasenu* (1952). Africans worked as assistants on these productions, making it possible that with independence (1957 in Ghana, 1960 in most francophone colonies), indigenous African directors could take the camera and fashion African-directed films.



South Africa was no different in its visual representations. An interesting case is the semi-documentary film *Silva the Zulu*, a melodramatic romance,

with witchcraft, love, and rivalries, based on “Zulu” customs pieced together by the Italian explorer Attilio Gatti and anthropologist Lidio Cipriani. The “traditional” image of the “native” gives us a certain impression of authenticity that 20th century cinema required for its “Africans.”

## EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN CINEMA: RACE FILMS - 1920s–1940s

The years after World War I saw the development of the studio system in the U.S. with Hollywood as its center. This was a cinema created by white producers and directors for white audiences, and blacks who appeared in their films were represented in stereotypical fashion as subservient and foolish “coons,” as sexu-

ally aggressive “bucks,” criminally inclined, Uncle Toms, fat, desexualized Mammies, or tragic, sexual bi-



racial women (Bogle. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. 2016.). All of these types could find their model in *Birth of a Nation*. These categories presented fixed types of blacks who were always inferior to whites in intelligence, morality, or self-control. Even “good” blacks, i.e., faithful servants, were shown as needing whites to govern their lives, as being happier when being taken in charge by whites. That is, in film the blacks were subordinated to a paternalistic system that functioned to control their evil impulses and guide them in their weaker judgments, and as happiest under these circumstances. The culmination of the films that conveyed this was *Gone with the Wind* (1939). In this, one of the greatest blockbusters of American films, blacks were portrayed as happiest when slaves, as never being whipped or abused by their masters, as fit for working in the cotton fields.

European colonial cinema like Korda’s *Sandersons of the River* (1935) purveyed much of these same types, and it is no surprise that the Korda brothers were equally at ease working in Hollywood and Britain, where they made such films.



Resistance to this mainstream cinema effectively begins after *Birth of a Nation*, especially with Oscar Micheaux. He first succeeded in attempts at a counter-cinema depicting figures of middle-class, educated, at times light-skinned, positive

African Americans, working to enhance education for racial uplift (*Within Our Gates*, 1919). Social problems were highlighted, even as colorism seemed to be accepted.

However, this yielded in the 1920s–1940s to the full gamut of film genres that were also popular in Hollywood, including black gangster films, cowboy films, romances, musicals, and films about racial passing. Even black horror films appeared.



As movie theaters were segregated in the South, theaters for African Americans often guaranteed an audience for

race films, and especially during the silent film era it was possible for filmmakers like Micheaux, Williams, and others to churn out a significant body of genre films. Race movies appeared from about 1918 to early 1950s. They ended largely due to the increased costs brought about by the introduction of sound and color. Additionally, desegregation, which began in the 1950s, removed the necessity for all-black movie theatres.

With the post-World War II period, both the United States and much of Africa saw race relations undergo radical changes. Returning soldiers on both continents demanded political rights and economic opportunity. The massive movement of African Americans in the Great Migration was matched with similar sea changes in culture. Seeds for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and for African Independence were both being laid. Sudan and Tunisia became independent in 1956, and in 1957 Ghana became the first sub-Saharan country to attain independence.

## AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS AND AFRICAN INDEPENDENCE: ENTRY OF BLACKS INTO MAINSTREAM CINEMAS - 1950s

By the 1950s, black people came to be employed in new cinematic roles. The Jamaican-American Harry Belafonte, unlike Paul Robeson, did not play the “native African.” In a strikingly dramatic shift in Hollywood roles, he played the protagonist in Preminger’s *Carmen Jones* (1954), performing not only as singer (though dubbed over!), but also as the tragic lover of Carmen. His role as the Don José character was transformed into that of a U.S. Army soldier.

The major black actor of the period was Sidney Poitier. Poitier played roles that emphasized the middle class figure or the positive representative of an oppressed people, such as *Cry the Beloved Country* (Korda 1951) and *Raisin in the Sun* (Daniel Petrie, 1961). The role of the educated black doctor confronting liberalism’s tensions over race was most famously linked with his performance in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967). Intermarriage between whites and blacks was still illegal in fourteen states when Poitier played the role of the fiancé to the white Katherine Houghton.



African cinema was to finally get its day as Paulin Vieyra’s *Afrique sur Seine* was made in France in 1955

(filmed in Paris due to the colonial ban on Africans making films on the continent). *Afrique* recorded the reactions of a group of African university students to their experience of living in the metropole. The beginning of an

African cinema, made by African directors working on the continent, was Sembène Ousmane's work, which began with the short film "Borom Sarret" (1963), a brief day-in-the-life of a wagoner experiencing the everyday struggle to make a living in Dakar.



Senegal achieved its independence in 1960, and Sembène is credited with fostering the first major film movement in Africa, and with setting the

agenda based on ideals of national liberation, the struggle against neo-colonialism, socialism, and the need to address social issues. His films contested patriarchy and the corruption of the ruling classes. He directed the first feature-length film in 1966, *La Noire de...*, a film dealing with the tragic suicide of a Senegalese woman who served as the housemaid and nanny to a French couple. She followed her employers to France when they left Senegal, and discovered the misery of the subaltern's life abroad rather than living her dreams of paradise on the Riviera. Like Spike Lee, Sembène believed in a *cinéma engagé*, and the use of the camera as a revolutionary and political tool.



Millions of American civil rights and anti war protesters marched, nonviolently participated in

sit-ins and teach-ins, left the country, or went to prison to show their opposition to American racism and imperialism; but despair about the

ineffectiveness of nonviolent protest led some to express their outrage through urban riots, armed resistance, and black revolutionary movements like the Black Panthers, with ideals of Black Power. Slogans like "Black is Beautiful" coincided with the massive counter-cultural anti-war protest movements. One of the films that best embodied these times was Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baaad Asssss Song* (1971). Gordon Parks's *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972) ushered in "Blaxploitation" films with strong male anti-heroes that embodied positive self-images and powerful, assertive types with fearless defiance of white authorities. They were marked by sexually potent, handsome leads who displaced subservient or sycophantic types who had been playing the role of victim. This was the period of Malcolm X, the Black Muslim leader whose philosophy of resistance "by any means possible" was diametrically opposed to the non-violent resistance of Martin Luther King Jr. The films that followed this period reflected the changing times.

## ENTRY INTO THE MAINSTREAM CINEMAS: AMERICAN MASS ENTERTAINMENT, AFRICAN CINEMA COMING INTO ITS OWN - 1970s-1980s

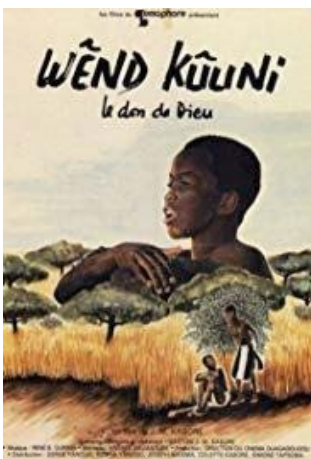
The 1970s-1980s saw the growth of action films aimed at mass audiences, and the successful entry of major black entertainment figures into the American mainstream. As Africa's last colonies achieved independence by the 1970s and 1980s, major black American actors appeared on the screen. The comedian Eddie Murphy's *Beverly Hills Cop* (1983) earned \$300 million, the most successful film ever at that time. More biting comedians like Richard Prior and Godfrey Cambridge were also increasingly popular. During this same period, African cinema was also coming into its own.

## SWEET SWEETBACKS BAADASSSSS SONG



Films about the liberation struggle transformed the cinema representation of Africans into agents in their own history

(Gerima, Sembène, Hondo, Cissé, Sissoko). For these directors it was not yet time for the frivolity of entertainment; Sembène called cinema Africa’s “night school.” In *Wend Kuuni* (1982) Gaston Kabore depicts a pre-colonial Africa untainted by European stereotypes, telling the story of an abandoned child, whose mother had been accused of witchcraft, and who had been taken in by a village community. In *Xala* (1974) Sembène tells the classic story of the newly rich, corrupt class of bourgeois businessmen who assume control of the country with independence, betraying the independence and selling out to the French. In *Finye* (1982), Souleymane Cissé portrays university students in revolt against the regional autocratic governor, recreating the student revolts against the military dictatorial rule in Mali in 1980.



Films about women’s oppression were made by Cameroonian, Senegalese, and Malian directors (1978, *Prix de la liberté*, Jean-Pierre Dikongue-Pipa; 1989, *Finzan*, Cheikh Oumar Sissoko; 1989, *Yaaba*, Idrissa Ouédraogo). The radical first generation calling for revolution (Gerima,

Hondo, etc.) was followed by these directors working to ameliorate society and bring forth a new day in Africa.

## DECOLONIZATION REALIZED: 1980s–1990s

The late 1980s were marked by the rise of Spike Lee who, like his African counterparts, used cinema to ameliorate the evils of society. His major films, including *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Malcolm X* (1992), and *Crooklyn* (1994), transformed black cinema. The decolonization of black cinema, in both worlds, meant not only the political freedom from colonial rule, but freedom from the studios of Europe and the United States that had generated debilitating images of black people from the onset of cinema. Taking the camera back meant “shooting back” against the mainstream industry (Thackway, *Africa Shoots Back*, 2004).

The cinema was decolonizing as black films were being produced increasingly with black audiences in mind, but now also as participants in the dominant culture. Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* (1992) presented Malcolm as a converted Black Muslim, challenging white supremacy. At the same time, to appeal to a mainstream audience, Lee omitted Malcolm’s speeches that would have been offensive to whites.<sup>3</sup> As Black people moved from being objects of the white gaze to subjects producing images of themselves, creative roles, but also new stereotypes, began to emerge, notably those in “hood” movies (*Barbershop*, 2002). Simultaneously, ironic comic actors became major stars, including Eddie Murphy, Whoopie Goldberg, and Bill Cosby. Rap stars created a worldwide movement, with young men marked by style, attitude, and slang—verbal hipsters, sometimes shown as living on the edge of crime or drugs, and often in resistance to the oppressiveness of white dominant society. Women were increasingly shown as empowered, even armed, and more than a match for male fighters (Pam Greer, in American films; *Les Saignantes* (2005) in Bekolo’s work).

Snappy, sometimes superficial, always stylish, young, black, and beautiful—the appeal was to mass audiences around the world. In cinema, black Americans were finally finding the economic power as producers and consumers that had eluded Oscar Micheaux and generations past.

The creation of a commercial black cinema corresponded with the end of a colonial period: decolonization had occurred, but as Sembène's *Xala* and *Guelwaar* and Djibril Diop's *Hyenas* show, it was to be a period of independence in name only, where decolonization was to be succeeded by neo-colonization, neo-liberalism, globalization, and increased dependency. Only now, black Americans were increasingly part of the mainstream, as Whoopi Goldberg and Denzel Washington became global superstars, and Spike Lee a major studio director.

## WOMEN DIRECTORS NOW COMING INTO THEIR OWN: 1980s–Present

Female stars and directors also were breaking barriers in Africa. There was a relatively small number of African women directors, most of whom began their work after the 1980s, and many of whom worked on documentaries (Anne-Laure Folly, Sarah Maldoror, Safi Faye). It was extremely hard for women to find the finances to make films. A smaller number were able to work on fiction film, including Fanta Nacro, whose short and feature films provided a perspective on key issues like patriarchy, war, and modernity (*Night of Truth*, 2004; *Puk Nini*, 1996). Perhaps most famous among early women directors was Safi Faye, whose *Kaddu Beykat* (1976) carved a space for docu-fiction, influenced by the *cinéma vérité* of Jean Rouch, for whom she had worked as an assistant. Her feature film *Mossane* (1996) addressed issues of love and marriage from a feminist perspec-

tive, eschewing the familiar male representation of woman as victim.

African American women also achieved success as filmmakers at roughly the same period. Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) gave a major treatment to the Gullah community at the time of the Great Migration north, centering the narrative on the strong women who sustained the community and preserved the memories and connections to the original Igbo slaves. As in the 1972 revolutionary film *Sambizanga* by Sarah Maldoror, which dealt with the struggle for liberation in Angola from the perspective of the rebel leader's wife, it is women whose roles emerge into the limelight, reversing the conventional male narratives. A notable example is Ava DuVernay, who won the directing award in the 2012 Sundance Film Festival for her second feature film *Middle of Nowhere*. With *Selma* (2014), DuVernay became the first black female director to be nominated for a Golden Globe Award, and the first black female director to have her film nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture.



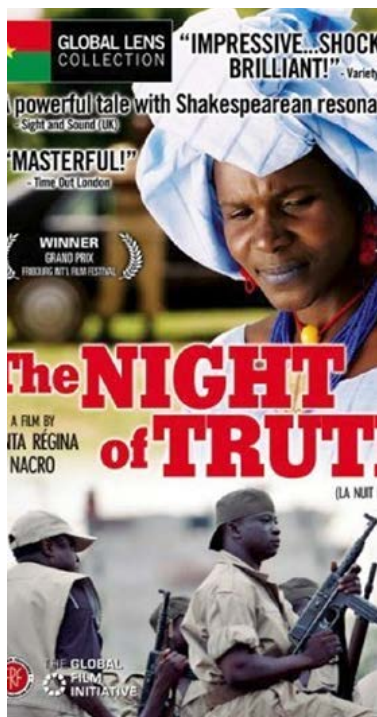
## THE INDEPENDENTS: 1970s–Present

This would be a sad ending if all that success meant was entry into commercial cinema. However, an important body of independent black cinema also developed on both continents, with less well-known, but more brilliantly endowed directors emerging, like Charles Burnett, Kathleen Collins, Zeinabu Davis, and Haile Gerima. The latter, an Ethiopian, a product of the Black Power period and graduate of UCLA's famous film school, repre-



sents something of the creativity of black independent film that brings together black Africa and black America in a new and truly decolonized cinema.

In Africa, independent creative filmmakers bucked the trends, beginning with Djibril Diop Mambéty, who created brilliant independent films in the 1970s and 1990s such as, *Touki Bouki* (1973), *Hyenas* (1992), and *Le franc* (1994). A new generation succeeded him with imaginative new directions of documentary film (Jean-Marie Teno, *Afrique, je te plumeria* [1992]); futurist and edgy visions (Jean-Pierre Bekolo, *Quartier Mozart* [1992], *Aristotle's Plot* [1996], *Les Saignantes* [2005] and *Naked Reality* [2016]). Brilliant filmmakers worthy of the designation of world directors emerged, including Mahamet Saleh

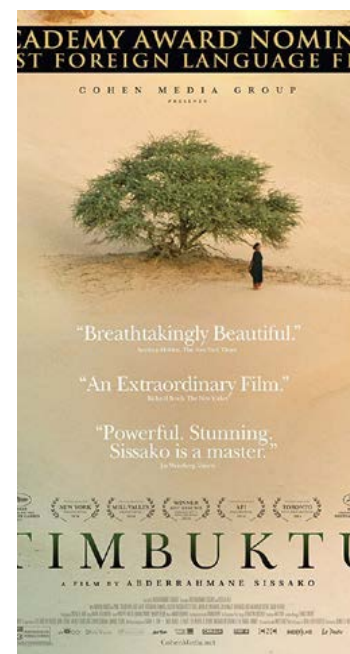


Haroun (*Darrett* [2006], *A Screaming Man* [2010]) and Abderrahmane Sissako (*La vie sur terre* [1999], *Heremakono* [2002], *Bamako* [2006]). Sissako justly earned the title of “world” cinema director following his triumph with *Timbuktu* (2014), a film that achieved critical and

box office success across three continents—the U.S., Europe, and Africa.

Like Spike Lee, whose Oscar was for his oeuvre, Sissako became a major figure by reaching out to an African audience, but also to world audiences, with films of political and intellectual substance and great aesthetic accomplishment. Black film had not only decolonized on both continents, but prevailed. Its strengths can be measured by the considerable success of *Black Panther* (2018) whose broad appeal was grounded in the celebration of black culture both on the African continent and in the African diaspora.

The vast struggle for independence in Africa and the United States was marked by striking coincidences. Despite the enormous differences in time, space, and history that marked the black populations on the continent and in the diaspora, both worlds were deeply impacted by colonialism. In the United States, following slavery, the demolition of Reconstruction resulted in patterns of oppression that reflected the broad racist thinking of the times, thinking, like that of Gobineau, that rationalized racial domination. The Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. and the protracted efforts to win independence in Africa occurred during the same period, and at the heart of the call for political freedom came the demand to control the image, with the power to represent oneself. This essay has attempted to sketch out how that demand led to the creation of a “decolonized” cinema, on both continents. At times major figures like Robeson partici-



pated in the cinemas of both worlds, but often it was through independent efforts to create “one’s own” cinema that these amazingly parallel body of works emerged. The story of the passage from a dominated people to one that has become free, and whose culture is now recognized on a world scale, can be seen in the arrival of *Black Panther* and *Timbuktu*. If the struggle for racial justice remains to be realized, it is still important that we recognize the creation of black cinema as a remarkable achievement. ●



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*Women’s Writing* (Heinemann, 2002), and *Postcolonial African Cinema: From Political Engagement to Postmodernism* (Indiana U P, 2007). *Trash! A Study of African Cinema Viewed from Below*, was published by Indiana University Press in 2013. He has edited numerous collections on such topics as Islam and African literature, African cinema, and women in African literature and cinema, including most recently with Carmela Garritano, *A Companion to African Film* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2018).

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Protest against US military intervention in Venezuela. Minneapolis, Minnesota. March 30, 2019. Image courtesy of Fibonacci Blue/Flickr.

# What is Happening in Venezuela, and What Can the U.S. Do?

LAURA WELLS

**V**ENEZUELA IS FACING SIGNIFICANT difficulties, and one of the worst is the widespread misinformation distributed by governments and media. In April I returned after 11 days in Venezuela, my sixth trip since 2005. I was on a delegation sponsored by the Alliance for Global Justice, focused on ending sanctions.

There is a lot of confusion about Venezuela, and this article will address important questions about why the economy of oil-rich Venezuela collapsed, and why both Obama and Trump placed sanctions on the country.

Presidents Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro have not been perfect. They made many mistakes, such as not succeeding in diversifying the economy, lack of financial reserves to cope with falling oil prices, and maintenance of a fixed exchange rate far beyond its viability. Venezuelans have been hurt and frustrated by those mistakes, and yet they understand their context, and remember what life was like before Chávez began the process (“el proceso”) of empowering people, and lifting people out of poverty.

“What can we do as a government and as citi-

zens of the United States?” is our key question. Most people in both Venezuela and the U.S. can agree on these three basics:

1. **No war.** Even Venezuelans who did not vote for Nicolás Maduro do not want to be bombed or invaded. Ironically, the threat of military intervention has increased national pride and unity among Venezuelans. Many friends were worried for my safety and the safety of the 12-member delegation. After arriving I felt safer than I expected, and my main fear was about what the United States (my own country, that I love in so many ways) might do. Even in the U.S., most people do not want another Vietnam, or another Libya or Syria.
2. **End U.S. sanctions.** Sanctions are a form of economic warfare. Sanctions kill, and children are the primary victims. Food and medicines are greatly affected. Sanctions impede the ability of Venezuela—and other countries—to solve their own problems; and unilateral coercive measures are out-of-line with the United Nations Charter and the Organization of American States.
3. **Respect other nations’ sovereignty.** Both Venezuelans and people in the U.S. question the credibility of the U.S. government regarding its harsh critiques of Venezuela’s government. The wealthiest country the world has ever known, the United States, has suffered from a growing gap between rich and poor, and from deteriorating schools, non-existent free neighborhood healthcare centers, infant mortality, high incarceration rates, and unjustified killings by police, along with problematic elections of public officials who could potentially solve those problems.



## “REGIME CHANGE”

Our government has not been following those three basics. An early sign that predicts U.S. interference in a nation’s sovereignty is use of the word “regime.” That word is broadcast by the media, and even picked up by progressives. It casts aspersions on the “government,” “administration” or “presidency” of non-aligned countries, and leads to the term “regime change.” Do we refer to Theresa May’s regime? Obama’s regime? Another key sign is using the term “humanitarian crisis” rather than “economic crisis,” followed by offering “humanitarian aid” that even the International Red Cross and the United Nations recognized as politicized rather than helpful. Former United Nations independent expert Alfred de Zayas reported after visiting Venezuela that it is an economic, not a humanitarian crisis, contrary to reports by some human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, which line up with the governments of the U.S. and U.K., where they are based and funded.

## How did the Venezuelan economy get so messed up?

Here are 14 basics to help shed light on this complicated situation.

\* **Venezuela has an oil economy.** For close to 100 years, oil has represented about 90% of Venezuela's exports. It is a long-standing example of the "Dutch disease," which Wikipedia describes as "the apparent causal relationship between the increase in the economic development of a specific sector (for example natural resources) and a decline in other sectors (like the manufacturing sector or agriculture)."

\* **Oil was nationalized in 1976.** More than 20 years before Hugo Chávez was elected president, oil was nationalized in Venezuela. Only the wealthiest Venezuelans benefited, however, and 70% of Venezuelans lived in poverty. In the late 1980s and 1990s, policies were enacted that increased inequality.

\* **Chávez shared wealth and power.** When Chávez became president in 1999, his first acts were:

- Achieving almost universal literacy.
- Creating a healthcare system for even the poorest barrios by trading oil for Cuban doctors, who then helped train Venezuelan doctors.
- Developing a new voter-approved constitution using participatory democracy.
- Establishing an electoral system that former U.S. president Jimmy Carter described as the best of the 90 countries he had studied.

Chávez earned the love and respect of the newly empowered Venezuelans, while the Venezuelans and foreign investors who formerly held all the wealth and power, and wanted to keep it that way, were hostile to him. While oil is definitely a factor in Venezuela, it is not all about oil. The "threat of a good example" is the real problem, and can be shown by historic hostility toward countries without oil such as Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, Grenada, and Chile.

\* **Regional integration made countries stronger.** Hugo Chávez was inspired by Simón Bolívar's goals for regional integration. In the early 1800s, Bolívar led the struggle for liberation and won, beating Spain, the superpower of the time. While facing the United States, the superpower of these times, Chávez strengthened sovereignty for the peoples of Latin America. He helped block a "Free Trade Agreement of the Americas," and played a leadership role in establishing organizations such as ALBA, CELAC, UNASUR, TeleSUR, and PetroCaribe. These organizations focus on economic and political integration, trade alliances, and television communications, and they exclude Canada and the U.S. This solidarity among nations made each country stronger, empowering them to stand up to the enormous economic, cultural, and political influence of the United States, which was nearly impossible for an individual country to do in the past.

\* **Coup attempts failed, and "backfired."** In the early 2000s, the opposition made three attempts to oust Chávez: a military coup, a bosses' lockout of the state-owned oil company, and a recall election as authorized in the new constitution. In stunning "backfire effects" the opposition and their U.S. allies lost all three, and "chavismo" became stronger.

\* **Economic inequality was reduced.** For the next 10 years, Venezuela showed a marked reduction in inequality, per the "GINI coefficient" measurement. People were lifted out of poverty when oil wealth was shared with all Venezuelans, and policies were enacted that improved health, education, housing, and the minimum wage.

\* **Economic warfare increased.** The scenario is familiar in history. "Make the economy scream" was Richard Nixon's order to the CIA in 1970 when he planned to oust Chilean president Salvador Allende. What are the weapons

of economic warfare used against Venezuela now? They include manipulation of the foreign exchange rate to induce inflation, planned shortages due to hoarding and smuggling of subsidized goods for profit, failure of banks to extend needed credit, and capital flight which increases the cost of imports. The leadership of both the Democratic and Republican parties are hostile toward Venezuela, using terms such as “authoritarian,” “autocrat,” and “dictator.” This bipartisan agreement, in combination with aligned media ranging from Fox to NPR, makes it very hard for people to believe there is another side to the story. For more on this bipartisanship, see the section below, “Why did both Obama and Trump sanction Venezuela?”

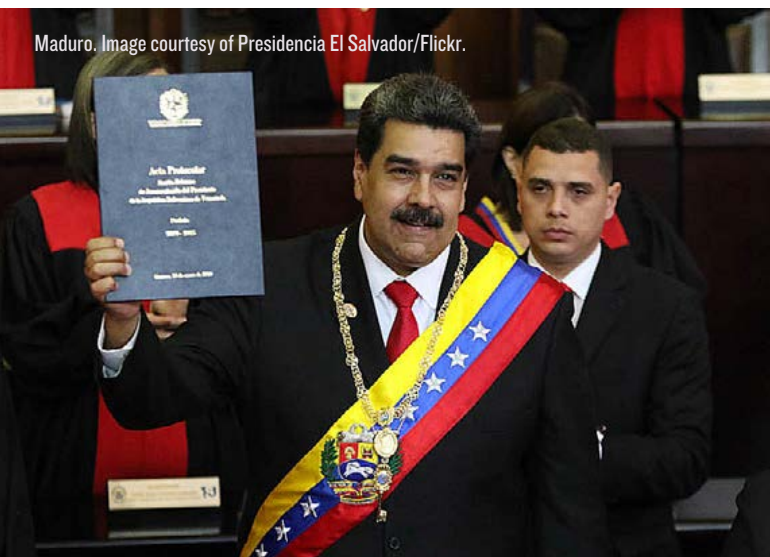
**\* Diversification of the economy had been a goal.** Almost everyone criticizes Chávez and Maduro for not diversifying the economy, however they did try, with various programs in manufacturing and agriculture. It is very difficult to get people to go “back to the farm.” In a long-time oil economy, producing goods locally costs much more than importing, and the money saved by importing could continue to reduce poverty and inequality.

**\* Peak oil went in reverse.** Remember “peak oil”? In the mid-2000s, it was predicted that

the cost of extracting oil would become so expensive that global oil production would decline and the price per barrel would increase. Instead of going up to \$200, it dropped from \$140, which was the price before the 2008 global financial meltdown, to less than half that in the years since 2014. How did that happen despite “free market” theories and environmental problems with fossil fuels? Nations and states subsidized hydraulic fracturing (fracking), tar sands oil, transcontinental pipelines, and offshore drilling. Since 2011, there were 20,000 new oil well permits in California alone. These combined subsidies lowered the price per barrel of oil, greatly squeezing Venezuela’s economy.

**\* Opposition perceived weakness—and opportunity—after Chávez’s death.** After Hugo Chávez’s hand-picked successor Nicolás Maduro was elected in April 2013, the Venezuelan and foreign opposition perceived a weakness and increased its many pressures on “chavismo.” In 2014 and 2015 Barack Obama enacted sanctions and incongruously labeled Venezuela an “unusual and extraordinary threat.” Violent and destructive opposition protests and economic warfare were ramped up, and U.S. sanctions and investment in “regime change” increased dramatically after Donald Trump’s election. Then it was an easy matter to blame a South American government for its economic collapse. Like so many other leaders of countries trying to overcome the impact of colonization and economic domination, it is clear that both Chávez and Maduro made serious mistakes. It was in the interests of media and politicians, funded by the foreign oil interests and other transnational corporations, to amplify these leaders’ mistakes, and downplay their successes.

**\* Sanctions are illegal and lethal.** Targeting another country with unilateral coercive measures is prohibited by the United Nations



Maduro. Image courtesy of Presidencia El Salvador/Flickr.

Charter. In Venezuela sanctions have caused deadly shortages in food and medicine, as well as in replacement parts for oil refineries, transit systems, and even instruments for the famed youth orchestras. By simply declaring that the elected president is not legitimate, U.S. and allies (who either agree with sanctions or who are intimidated by the power of the U.S.) have even withheld from the Venezuelan government billions of dollars of its own money.

**\* Re-election in 2018 was preceded by dialogue, and followed by allegations.** After five years of unrelenting pressures from the Venezuelan opposition and U.S. government, resulting in hard times for Venezuelans, Nicolás Maduro was still president, and was re-elected in May 2018. Seven months later, Juan Guaidó declared himself “interim president,” stating that the election of Maduro was not legitimate. Here are facts that get scant media attention.

1. Leading up to the 2018 election, at the last minute the opposition refused to sign an agreement negotiated for almost two years between the government and opposition with help from the president of the Dominican Republic and the former prime minister of Spain.
2. The opposition called for a total boycott of the election, apparently in order to discredit it. The boycott failed because moderate opposition candidate Henri Falcon ran. Ironically, frustration with the economic crisis was so great that if the opposition had participated in the election, they might have won. As it was, Falcon received 1.9



million votes to Maduro’s 6.2 million. Maduro achieved in 2018 an almost identical percentage of eligible voters that Obama achieved in 2008.

3. Allegations of fraud preceded and followed the election, and were repeated without evidence by corporate media outlets in which investigative journalism is a thing of the past, as demonstrated by the intensified prosecution of whistleblowers.

**\* Venezuelans know their history.** There was massive inequality when the opposition was in power, and although many chavistas blame Maduro for a large part of the desperate economic situation, they remember what life was like before Chávez came to power. They also remember the short-lived 2002 military coup, with its immediate severe repression and abolishment of democratic institutions. They do not want that in their future, which helps explain why Guaidó’s “interim presidency” has failed to capture the support of most civilians and the military. Venezuelans also know that the charge of “no free press” is false. They have seen media outlets stay in business after labeling Chávez and Maduro “dictator” in three-inch headlines, calling for their overthrow, and in fact playing a key role in the 2002 coup attempt.

**\* Interference continues.** Despite the apparent failure of the “interim presidency,” efforts toward “regime change” have continued on multiple fronts. Sanctions have increased. The U.S. administration presented, unsuccessfully, its case for removing Venezuela’s ambassador to the United Nations. In Washington, DC,

police entered the Venezuelan embassy, in clear violation of international law regarding embassies even in times of declared war. They arrested American activists who, as part of the Embassy Protection Collective, stayed at the embassy with the permission of the Venezuelan government. Leading up to the arrests, deliveries of food and supplies were prevented, and electricity and water were turned off, in moves very similar to the nation-wide, long-lasting power outages and water shortages in Venezuela, which are strongly suspected to be the result of sabotage.

### **Why did both Obama and Trump sanction Venezuela?**

This question has deep relevance, and was reflected in the first of four questions Rabbi Michael Lerner asked me before I left for Venezuela in March. Many aspects of our government are in play in opposing the “regime” in Venezuela.

**\* One aspect relates to the Electoral College in the United States.** Why haven’t any political leaders led us out of that outdated, slavery-based, undemocratic disaster? With the Electoral College in place, neither Democratic nor Republican candidates have anything to gain by *not* bashing Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro. Why? Because many disgruntled Venezuelans of the upper classes moved to Florida and they now organize with hard-line Cuban-Americans and compose a small but inordinately significant swing constituency in a swing state in the 2020 elections. What incentive is there for party leaders like Obama to alienate them and their campaign donations, instead of merely going along with the story “everybody knows”?

**\* U.S. Rep. Ro Khanna (CA) wrote a letter.** My delegation’s lead organizer saw Ro Khanna’s “Dear Colleague” letter to Secretary of State Pompeo change from an eloquent

call urging the Trump administration to end the sanctions to a letter with paragraphs that “strongly condemn the Maduro government’s actions,” call him a “failed autocrat,” and argue that because of current sanctions, “Venezuelan government officials can claim that the U.S. is waging an economic war.” It is an easy claim for Venezuelans to believe. They have experienced the economic and empowerment benefits brought to their lives by Chávez and Maduro, such as universal access to healthcare, housing, literacy, and suffrage. They have also experienced U.S.-backed opposition obstructions to these benefits, both when the opposi-



Mural of Hugo Chavez- Photo by David Hernández



tion ran the country before Chávez, and since. Unfortunately, even with statements against Maduro that toe the line of the Democratic Party national leadership, this otherwise informative and well-written letter only managed to gather 16 signers out of 435 members of Congress, 97 of whom are members of the Progressive Caucus. Yes, U.S. citizens need to pressure our government, *especially* those most likely to support the rights of regular people over corporate and billionaire interests.

\* **“Does the government represent the people?”** This is a good question to consider



when addressing why both Obama and Trump take the positions they take. A Princeton study pointed out that whether there is 100% public support for a given idea—or zero support—there is about a 30% chance of Congress passing a law that reflects the idea—unless the support or non-support comes from the 10% “elites.” Public policy lines up with their wishes. Unfortunately, (publicly funded) war creates profits for “elites,” as do (subsidized) oil companies and (bailed-out) financial institutions. Related to Venezuela, the military-industrial-financial complex benefits significantly from sanctions and threats of war, especially when the threats are aimed at an oil-rich country that has been sharing wealth and power with non-elites.

\* **Obama eased up on Cuba, and sanctioned Venezuela.** On December 17, 2014, Obama de-escalated the isolation of Cuba, while keeping the economic blockade in place. The very next day he signed S. 2142, an act created “to impose targeted sanctions on persons responsible for violations of human rights of anti-government protesters in Venezuela, to strengthen civil society in Venezuela, and for other purposes.” In so doing, Obama served the same powerful interests that in 2008 caused him to bail out Wall Street and not Main Street, and in 2009 motivated him to deliver what some call the “insurance company bail-out.” Rather than use his 60% majority in both houses of Congress to push for single-payer healthcare, he took it off the table and instead delivered Obamacare, without even a “public option” that would have made private insurance companies compete with a Medicare-style option. As a result, the U.S. healthcare system continues to be the worst system of the thirty wealthiest industrialized countries, in terms of expense, access, and results. Had Obama delivered a comprehensive system like other countries implemented long ago, and as Venezuela

did twenty years ago, it would be very hard for Trump or anyone to take it away from people who depend on it.

Regarding Cuba, changing demographics among Cuban-Americans made it less risky to ease Cuba-U.S. relations in order to move toward creating business opportunities there. Placing sanctions on Venezuela served to appease the hard-line Cubans living in Florida.

### What can we do?

As citizens it is our job to pressure our government—especially the best of them—to represent us in both domestic and foreign policy. As citizens, it is not our job to treat the Venezuela situation as another “yelp review” in which we judge what other countries do as right or wrong by standards our own country doesn’t even follow.

The U.S. has a lot of work to do inside our borders without interfering in the affairs of other nations. Doing the needed work in our country helps other countries by example rather than destroying them with our will.

- Dump the Electoral College, and stop looking for other excuses for elections “won” without the popular vote, such as Bush in 2000 and Trump in 2016.
- Progressives can learn from countries such as Venezuela that have already implemented education, healthcare, housing, and justice policies that democratic socialists like Bernie Sanders propose to implement in the U.S.
- See *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, a very well-named documentary about the attempted coup in 2002 against Hugo Chávez. It provides a lesson on media bias, and can provide hope, “esperanza.”
- Stop seeing South and Central America and the Caribbean as our domain, our “backyard,” or as needing a savior. Recog-

nize when our recent “help” has not helped other countries.

To help Venezuelans during their economic crisis, three fundamental options are on the table: no war, end sanctions (which are a form of war), and respect national sovereignty. Choosing those options will benefit not only Venezuela, but the rest of the world, including the United States. ●



LAURA WELLS blogs about the electoral and social revolutions in Latin America, and how they might apply to California and the United States. She is a Green Party political activist. Her blogs are found at <https://laurawells.org/blog/>.

### REFERENCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

[venezuelanalysis.com](http://venezuelanalysis.com) is a resource that provides perspective on news about Venezuela.

Video: “The Origins of Venezuela’s Economic Crisis.” In twelve minutes Greg Wilpert, a founder of [venezuelanalysis.com](http://venezuelanalysis.com) and journalist with *The Real News*, provides a comprehensive video that discusses Venezuela’s economic crisis and tries to take all of the underlying factors into account. He wraps up his analysis with the words, “The sanctions have now made a bad situation far worse and on top of it have made it almost impossible for the government to take corrective action because it lacks the resources to do so.” <https://therealnews.com/stories/the-origins-of-venezuelas-economic-crisis>

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) helps describe the role of the media in this piece, “There’s Far More Diversity in Venezuela’s ‘Muzzled’ Media Than in US Corporate Press”

<https://fair.org/home/theres-far-more-diversity-in-venezuelas-muzzled-media-than-in-us-corporate-press/>

Democracy Now! with Alfred de Zayas, who visited Venezuela as a UN representative in 2017

<https://truthout.org/video/the-us-is-violating-international-law-by-attempting-a-coup-in-venezuela/>



Art by Elizabeth Rosenbloom.

# Silent Rage

AMI WEINTRAUB

Dear Ben,

A lot has happened since you first asked me to tell this story of hope or truth or rage. It was a story to me then. Something I could imagine in

adventure-movie style; flames of glory surrounding our friends as we fought back against evil.

Now I feel it for myself. I have memories now, Ben. Memories of events I didn't live through. But memories that have always somehow been mine.

Before I remembered, I thought colonization functioned differently for Jewish people. Like maybe this theory that anti-semitism is such a unique form of oppression meant we actually hurt less. We were somehow different from other people who have also felt pain as a people.

But I've been wanting to tell you this memory of my family. It makes everything feel simultaneously more simple and more awful. I've known its outline my whole life, like it was a dream I had when I was a child. And I think you might know it too.

It starts with a hand-drawn

map of Vishay, Lithuania. I learned the name of this village from the football team my grandfather jokingly raved about.

"Your great-grandfather and all of his brothers played for the Vishay Bulldogs," he'd tell me when I was young.

He loved to tell stories like this about the family he'd married into. His own father died while his mother was pregnant with him. His siblings scattered throughout the country after they served in World War II.

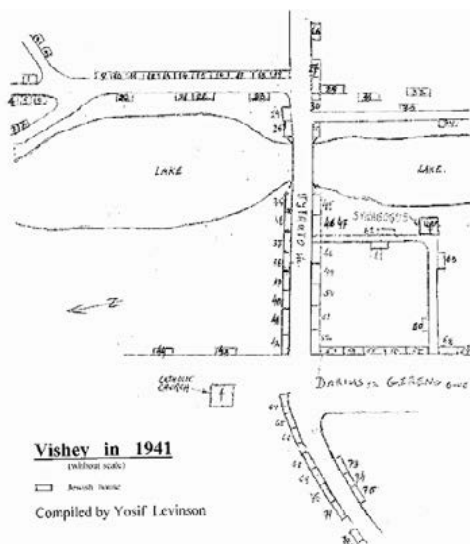
My grandmother came from a swarm of loud brothers, loyal sisters, and joyful parents who traveled the world to stay together. I could tell my grandfather was looking for a family like this. For stories that would nurture him through the loss of a man he never met.

I think we are searching for something similar, my grandfather and me. So I call out to him now in the only way I know how.

"Ta'amo David Weintraub Ben David Weintraub." And I patiently wait for him to return my call.

Once we began speaking again, we couldn't stop. He showed up in my dreams, at the bus stop, while I was eating with friends. He led me to this memory and helped me understand its power.

So, this map of Vishay. I found it on a website



called—you won't believe it—but it's called Shtetlinks.com. It's a barely functioning hold-over from the dot-com era that gave me as close to a feeling of opening a dusty, ancient box that I can still get.

A man named Yosif Levinson had drawn out a bare-bones map of Vishay, the village my father's maternal grandparents came from. This map maker lined the one main road and two giant lakes with small squares labeled "Jewish Houses." Each house had a number and each number was assigned to a family. This man, Yosif Levinson, knew where every Jew lived—like you might remember the homes of your closest friends.

So there it was. Simple. "66. Berznitsky" down by the bend in the road. "62. V. Fleisher" right next to the synagogue and the lake. My great-grandparents grew up only numbers apart from each other. I could feel their love story stretching out between these houses like giddily hung streamers.

Seeing that little square next to the water helped me remember the gurgling sound of tides breaking under the weight of oars. There was my family with bulging muscles and gritted teeth casting out coarse, handmade nets. There they were, catching fish in the light of early dawn to later sell at market.

And the synagogue. It too nestled along the banks. When we sat in the pews the beautiful smell of clean water and earthy mud wafted through the windows. We breathed its scent into our lungs as we gathered under the wooden shelter to honor every blessing and curse that befell us.

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This is my family's story. The part that's easy to write about. The Before that heals me more than knowing the details of After. But every

Jewish family has some story of After that is easier to tell if we didn't know what came Before.

After is choppy, ugly. But I need to share it with you. Still, admitting to it makes me feel embarrassed. Like I'm asking for your pity. Like you haven't felt this sorrow too.

But I feel its weight hanging heavy on my bones.

When I was 19, I drunkenly clung to a toilet, nauseous, crying for hours in a visceral awakening to our pain. I shouted to the strangers at the party, "Can you believe this happened? Can you believe this happened?"

I ask because I am embarrassed to feel so alone.

The story continues like this. Members of my family immigrated to the US around the 1920s. They became car-wreckers in Indianapolis and had children who had children who gave birth to me.

But Vishay still stood. There were brothers and parents and kids walking to synagogue, falling in love, catching fish in this town cut in two by its lakes.

I learn the rest from Google searches.

On June 2, 1941 the German army invades Vishay. With the help of local Lithuanians they force all of the remaining Jewish men into the synagogue. At night they lock up the doors and windows. During the day they send the men out to do humiliating manual labor like cleaning the streets and destroying Soviet bunkers.

By September 15, 1941 the Germans take all of the remaining Jews of Vishay to a nearby ghetto on the Katkiškės estate where they live until November 3rd.

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There's a video on Youtube entitled "Prayer Meeting Veisiejai" that was posted in 2017. You should look it up if you're curious. In the video two men walk arm in arm down a long, wooded path. The trees are so green and dark and lush I thought it was a CGI background.

"So you became a Christian in 1991," the man behind the camera asks in a TV host voice.

"Yes, about 23 years ago," says the man in what I assume to be a Lithuanian accent.

"And now we are going to a prayer meeting!" the loud voice behind the camera announces as if he is narrating migrating salmon in a wildlife video.

And the camera cuts to a boy playing piano in a big wooden room.

And it cuts to three people standing outside a simple, lime-green building.

"This is our church right here!" Again, the man behind the camera.

He zooms in on a gold plaque hung on the outside wall. It lists the name of the church and its website.

"This is the site of an old Jewish synagogue," the accented voice says from off screen.

"This is awesome!" says the man behind the camera.

And then we all walk into the Baptist Church that was once my family's synagogue.

The video is so slow and deliberate. I can see everything. The doorway where the mezuzah was once affixed, the wide hallway where little

kids played hand games while waiting for their parents to stop schmoozing. The doors that were once barred shut every night.

Then the Christian people singing hymns in the pews. Laughing and holding yellow flowers. A giant cross hanging in front of the big windows. The breeze blowing the curtains, letting in that beautiful smelling air.

I study their faces to see if they look anything like mine.

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I call my great uncle a week after watching the video. We speak for the first time since my grandmother died.

I want to ask him what he remembers. He starts simply, "It was very hard for them."



He uses words that are still urgent 100 years later. My father escaped the Russians. My mother and older brother ran from house to house, hiding behind stoves. On the boat, she was scared they'd be turned back because my brother had a cold.

He sends me a packet of documents. Photos of my great-grandmother Esther and her boy Sander at Ellis Island. Pictures of an awkward child dressed in a Soviet button-up next to a man with a beat-up jacket and flowing white beard. A woman with gaunt cheeks and a bubushka covering her hair.

There's a recent picture of a yellow house with a red tin roof overlooking a lake. Three people stand at the locked door, hand on the door knob. Number 62.



In 2004 my grandmother's cousin Rochelle writes in an email, "The yellow house is the one Velvel lived in as a fisherman—on the

lake. Esther and Sander lived there until they came to the US. My uncle (he is 89 right now) is in a lawsuit trying to get the property back—lakefront after all."

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I hope this story speaks for itself. I am only 23 but I have already spent years trying to recall what we have lost.

I know we speak so much about the After but it's the Before that I want to try and remember. The Yiddish songs Esther sang as she made Shabbos chicken and stinky's smeltz. The wet stones glowing on flames, steaming up the hot houses where people took a shvitz.

But it's harder for my great uncle to recall these things. Instead he tells me about being so poor in America they couldn't afford a second set of dishes for Pesach. My aunt tells me that they couldn't keep Kosher because there were few Kosher butchers in a city like Indianapolis.

We are living in the After that our grandparents taught us to call paradise. But we know they never felt fully comfortable here either. They told us to be grateful that our neighbors accepted us. But the lauded safety always felt contingent on our ability to prove our gratitude with assimilation. They tried to teach us as much about Before as they could without crying.

Now, I'm hardly a grandchild anymore. My grandparents whisper their memories into my ears while I sleep.

And I have my own memories now. I remember my dad affixing his kippah only when we pulled into the parking lot of our synagogue. I remember my mom asking my best friend not to gloat about what she did on Saturdays because I was at synagogue and felt left out. My friend's mother yelled at my mom that night and cancelled our sleepover.

I remember more horrors that I couldn't hide from my children. These memories make the six-year-olds I teach in Pittsburgh fear themselves.

I yearn for the synagogue, the yellow house, the lake. I'm angry that they took it from us, Ben. I'm angry that they are forcing us to fight a perpetual war as consolation.

I'm angry they made us forget.

And this is all I can remember.

Love and RAYJ,

Ami

זיכרוננו לברכה

Zikhronah Livrakha

May their memory be a blessing



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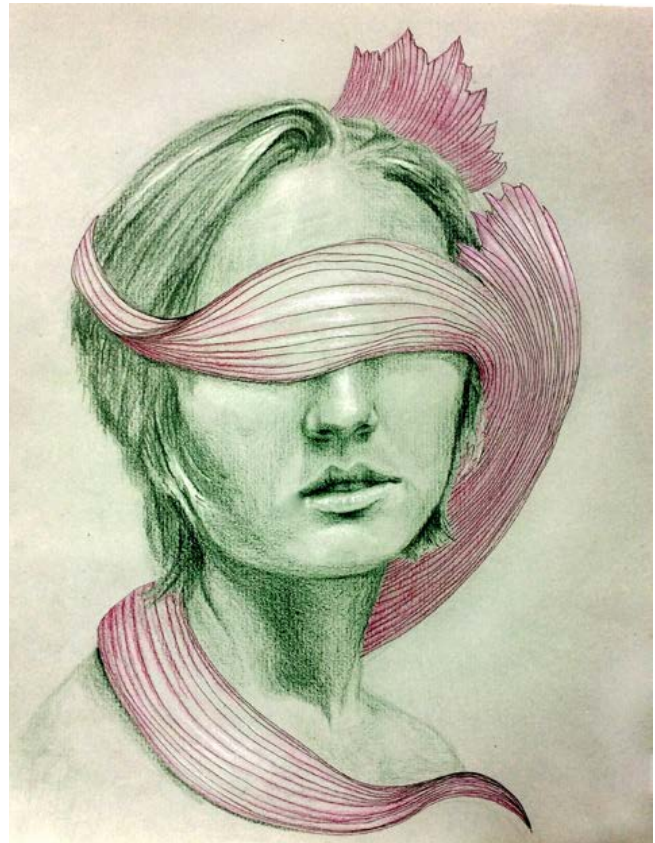
# Decolonization Means Being in Process: On Sex and Embodied History

DIANA CLARKE

IN THE CULTURE I GREW UP IN, THE EROTIC object is a white woman in the role of victim. Woman is what I once expected myself to someday become, and which is still, most of the time, how I am treated—and at those times, my victimhood is often presumed. Because of my skin in this culture, whiteness binds itself to me. I have only ever been called beautiful when so thin that I was dying: first from anorexia, then ten years later from e. coli. I lived through both diseases, and no one has called me beautiful since.

When examining my emaciated body in the mirror,<sup>1</sup> I thought often of the photos I'd seen in textbooks: Ashkenazi Jews like me, shriveled in bunks at Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. They were the other acceptable kind of victim: firmly in the past, their descendants ostensibly assimilated into whiteness. Demanding no contemporary reckoning.

But it wasn't that way for an ex-partner of mine, now a dear friend, whose grandfather had been a Nazi, one who joined the party on purpose in 1943. Once, in 2016, the two of us were undressing in the bathroom and took to



teasing, forgetting the water that had already started to run. Not wanting to waste, getting impatient, they urged me: “Get in the shower!” then turned a deep shade of pink. I laughed but it wasn't funny to them: the image of Jews in gas chambers loomed suddenly between us. For me the gruesome nature of the scene was absurd, unrelated to the gentle person I loved who stood in front of me. But they were frozen by the shame of Nazi blood in their veins, their present thick with that history.

Easier for me to laugh because the Holocaust operates as a discursive trump card, because while antisemitism is alive and alarming it also operates by its invisibility. (My partner at the time was both German and Puerto Rican, and we talked a lot about the ways my whiteness impacted them, about how the two of us carried reciprocal and particular histories of violence inside us, how differently our races determined our treatment on the street, but also how they had been taught as a German to

reckon with Germany’s history. I had been taught, as a Jew born into white womanhood, to see myself only as a victim, and not the way whiteness implicated me.) One-on-one I am white, although the white nationalists don’t think so, and my whiteness mostly protects me. Protects even that Anne Frank was the root of my desires: she wrote of wanting to touch her friends’ breasts<sup>2</sup> and at nine, reading her diary for the first time, I recognized my own wantings—once again, inside of history, a cathartic and intimate answer to the violence of the Nazis about which I was learning. Which is to name what I began to recognize: desire all around me, shot through with the promise of violence, and the violence of history.<sup>3</sup>

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Earlier this year, at the Leather Archives in Chicago, I came across an essay published in the early 1990s in a special Spirituality & S/M issue of *Prometheus*, the legendary BDSM magazine. In “Talmudic Laws for the Acquisition of a Slave,” Master Alan writes “What was Hagar’s relationship to Sarah? Was it an oppressive relationship based on terror—the kind of slavery that existed in the American South: slavery based on the whip? Or did Sarah and Hagar love each other? They spent their lives together.” With barely a line, Master Alan, who, I presume by his failure to mention race or to locate himself in a racial matrix, is at least white passing, skims past the history of violent chattel slavery that made the country in which my body and therefore my desires live, this place that made me. It is so easy and violent, desiring sex, to overlook history—yet the Jewish texts which give rise to Master Alan’s Talmudic interpretation were also used to jus-



Artist: Engin Akyurt

tify the Atlantic slave trade<sup>4</sup>; reckoning with the erotics of enslavement means telling this story—and it also means not staying in it, not reifying it, not suggesting that this story is the story as it always must be. It means asking who is most pressed to bear the weight of history.

In “[Consent, Control, Compassion, and Why I am Fucking Tired of Explaining Why ‘Race Play’ is Different From Racism](#),” Mollena Lee Williams-Haas, of the blog *The Perverted Negress*, writes, regarding Ciara’s music video for “[Love Sex Magic](#),”

Black women [...] are often expected to carry the weight of history such that even expressing our sexuality must be an act scrubbed clean of anything that might resemble non-consensuality. Furthermore, the idea that we are aware of and deliberately choosing to express ourselves as sexually liberated is fraught because we can’t possibly escape the crushing jaws of institutionalised racism. Any Black Woman who would agree to submit, as fantasy or even for a few minutes in a music video, must be a self-hating Negro who needs to have her Mama sit her down right now and talk some damn sense into her.

Looking to the Talmud, Master Alan explores the parameters of “consensual slavery”: “One does not acquire a slave simply by paying for her or, as in our society, by collaring her. According to the Talmud Kiddushin (Tractate on Marriages), a slave must perform a servile act such as removing the master’s shoe [...]” Master Alan then goes on to explain that, according to the Talmud, in traditional heterosexual marriage, itself a form of property acquisition,



the marriage is only made official if the penetrative sex that codifies it is consensual—and it may be either vaginal or anal.

Despite my disappointment in his writing on race and history, reading Master Alan's explication of this process was exciting to me because it highlighted choice. It framed marriage as a practice of made, rather than imposed, meaning between two people choosing to bond to one another, but only if they agree on that bond, and on the sex that makes it.

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Colonization is inherently non-consensual, which means colonization has no place in sex. And yet: here it is. Because colonization is everywhere, and sex exists (persists, resists) inside the culture that made it. Colonization reshapes borders and takes control of land, of the bodies of the people who live on that land, imposes its own narrative. A map can make official those nonconsensual borders and the violence they do, or it can show the contours of the land exactly as it is, with specificity and no judgement—perhaps even with care.

As [Cavanaugh Quick](#) put it at a workshop I attended recently,<sup>5</sup> I acknowledge the inherent contradiction in me, a non-Native person,<sup>6</sup> writing about decolonization from the stolen land on which I live, and where Haudenosaunee, Shawnee, Erie, Ponca, Osage, Seneca, and Susquehannock people (among others) were living long before my ancestors arrived on this continent. I do this work on stolen land to help do some healing in response to colonial violence in the place where I live, in the communities where I live; so much of colonization is tied up with sexual violence and nonconsent.



Decolonizing sex means acknowledging that the history of colonization is ongoing into this long present.

The only colony I can liberate is my own body,<sup>7</sup> and my body is everywhere. I feel in myself a stranger's heart across the street, the keening of a cut tree, the energy left behind by whoever was in this room before me. Borders are already false, but recognition of my

particularity protects me.

Though I'm porous, I don't mean that another's touch defines me, or my sex. But it's true that nearly all touch undoes me, I am that impacted—and that impactful, though I have trouble believing that my touch can do the same. Yet I fear my own capacity for accidental violence, for the way the culture expresses itself through my body.

Colonization is not just border-crossing, which can be generative and even life-saving; colonization is control by an 'other,' an exertion of power rather than simply a startling intimacy. So how do I avoid an internal colony, trying to control and deny myself—and that denial leaking across my borders to harm some other? In "Despisals," Muriel Rukeyser demands: "Look at your own building. / You are the city." Body as land, body as geography. So many cities have been my lovers, held me better than I could hold myself.

But it's easy for me to be held by a city; I'm white.<sup>8</sup> Whiteness too maps on the city of my body. Dorothy Allison writes: "Maybe they have red-lined their erotic imaginations since growing up, but what made them breathe hard when they were girls?"

When I was little I called myself a girl, and a

ballet about slavery made me breathe that kind of hard.

A production of *Le Corsair* on PBS, the free TV channel which made accessible the pretensions of the bourgeoisie. Adapted from a Byron poem, I learned just recently on the internet. At the time I didn't desire to know history, or context. I only desired. And unknowingly, I desired history.

The plot goes this way: A pirate saves an enslaved maiden and in doing so redeems his lawlessness. All I remember, really, is the shackles and how my wrists ached for them, the derivative script I wrote on looseleaf paper and recruited my friends to rehearse with me at recess. I loved to exercise direction, but when the scarf wrapped around my wrist I lost not just the desire for control but the capacity for speech. As being bound affects me still.

Director and actor: the pirate and the maiden. White femininity lets me play the victim while running the show behind the scenes. This is still true even though I'll never be a woman, something I already suspected as a girl.

White womanhood is the fear of being colonized and overtaken. White womanhood is that fear so loud and strong that those of us who marinated in it forget our power and blame an 'other,' not realizing the harm we do. Decolonization is recognizing that unilateral power and refusing it, building something relational and particular instead.

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On Instagram, on Valentine's Day, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha<sup>9</sup> [reposted](#) Dawn Serra's words:

What if sex could be anything we wanted it to be that felt sexual and yummy? What if we could create sexual exchanges that honored our bodies and what we most wanted



in that moment? [...] Solo sex, partnered sex, group sex, sex without genital touching, sex without penetration, sex with toys, sex with pillows and ramps and supports [...] sex over distance, sex in our minds, sex across time and space—none of this relies on a certain kind of body or a certain level of desirability [...] We can use sex to connect, to heal, to move through pain, to ground us, to play, to have fun, to process stress, to experience touch, and we can also get alllll those things met without ever engaging in sex. That's the beauty of what's possible when we toss out the script.

A map can enforce violent borders, but it can also simply render the nuances of the landscape underneath. How do we find one another without defining each other, but by making something new between (including that sex which I make only with myself)?

This work doesn't require the rejection of sex, but rather the rejection of scripts and imposition, and the choosing—or not—of sex with intention. It requires the decentering of certain acts as more sexual, or more legitimate, than any other—the decentering of any body, or combination of bodies, as more legitimate than any other. Williams-Haas writes “I abso-

lutely understand that people perceive [race and consensual nonconsent play] as a dangerous slippery slope. I cannot help but wonder at how much more slippery it is for us to step out of authenticity. Is it preferable that we deny our core sexual desires for the sole reason that it ‘looks bad?’ How slippery is it when we, the casual observer, make assumptions about the self-esteem of the players involved in the exchanges we witness?”

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Last summer the cisgender man I was dating<sup>10</sup> called me “the most cis” of my trans friends when I told him a story about an uncomfortably gendered encounter with a waiter at a Czech restaurant in Northern Ohio. His words hurt me, but I didn’t figure out how to say so until after the night was over, after I had swung my thighs over his and pooled wet in my underwear as his fingers teased the seams, melting with pleasure even as I feared that his mind might be calling me woman. And though it hurt, the truth was he had, partly, clumsily, named something real that I’m loath to admit: the shape of my body with its long hair and large chest looks like what the culture calls woman, and I keep being read that way no matter what else I change. But instead of rejecting him for failing to understand completely (and for telling a hard truth in the language he knew), I refused the colonial attitude that rendered him, as a cisgender man, absolutely oppressive or powerful over me, rejected the victim politics my learned white womanhood suggested, and instead opted for intimacy. When I told him how his words made me feel he heard me, apologized, and recognized my masculinity and the messy desire of my body; it was delicious. We talked late into the night on a low retaining wall about the pleasure we give and limits to the desires we ourselves permit.

Days later, I asked him if he might be will-

ing to receive, despite his fear of monopolizing or claiming pleasure, and he wanted it as much as I did. I crawled down the bed, then his voice stayed the movement of my body: “Please—” he said. “Not that you’ve used any words for me, but they all feel terrible. What about just—between my legs?” “Between your legs,” I repeated, nodded, asked: “Can I use my mouth?” Mouth a body-word so much less fraught, one that for me means only and exactly itself. Unlike all the entrapping terms for genitals around which we moved together, this discourse of relation (mouth between legs) felt true and kind, not an objectification (a colonization) by naming, but a mapping in relation: yes, between. A relief: I was not alone in semantic discomfort simply because of my nonbinary gender. He knew language was a



trap too, and by rejecting it he made clear that the specific want of his specific body was particularly, and reciprocally (not scriptedly), for me.

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Recently, to make my borders stronger, I decided only to have sex with myself—not for good, and I still desire sex with others, more often than I can manage. But someone I’m sweet on asked me to have a conversation about making out after eight months of mutual crushing and long dreamy dates, and in opening to one another our fears about the way sex can create unmeetable expectations, can throw off kilter the most grounded and intentional relationship, I saw clearly the ways I have allowed sex to acquire unintended meaning and expectation between my partner and me.

I was treating sex as the barometer for the emotional health of our relationship, expecting it to operate at a constant, staking my social worth on the amount of sex I was having—which pressures my partners to want a certain amount of sex, or kind of sex, in order to legitimate me. And so we talked on the phone, and my partner listened, and I felt relieved: they wanted this pause too—not because they don’t want me, but because they want to be having sex because we both want sex, and not to prove some other thing. Which means I get to practice trusting that they want me and this relationship even when we’re not fucking, and by looking right at the ways I’ve used sex to make meaning, I am asking myself, too, to be gentle with the jealousy that arises in me when they have sex with other people, to trust that that sex does not say anything about how or whether they want sex and connection with me.

Some many weeks later, after a long pause



from sex and a lot of conversation, my partner and I spent a strange and emotional night in a motel in western Maryland. I woke up to them holding me, and my body ached for their hands. They felt my wanting, but asked anyway, again and again. Like this? Is this okay? And moved their fingers so slow across my skin, caught up my mouth with their mouth. Was it sex? Not as I’d been taught to understand it. But I was present for all of it, and every moment, in that moment, felt true.

Decolonization means being in process. This is work unfinished and unfinishable because it means making specific meaning; it means being present to moments and dynamics and desires as they arise. It means taking account of history and not glossing over it. Whether done by people who shared our identities or not, violence permeates, and its symptoms express differently in the different bodies it occupies, with their different histories; some landscapes flood, and others turn arid. Decolonizing sex means not just undoing the redlines in our minds, but learning how they got there and making reparation according to the harm from which we benefit (and which also harms us in that benefit). Decolonizing sex means recognizing socially imposed meaning (what a body or a gesture symbolizes), and the mutual making instead of particular meaning between. ●



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appeared in *Scalawag Magazine*, *World Literature Today*, *The Village Voice*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

## FURTHER READING:

*The Revolution Begins at Home*, ed. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

*Decolonizing Sexualities: Transnational Perspectives, Critical Interventions*, eds.

Sandeep Bakshi, Suhraiya Jivraj, Silvia Posocco

Black People Kink podcast

The Perverted Negress by Mollena Lee Williams-Haas [www.mollena.com](http://www.mollena.com), including this [list](#) of Race Play Resources

*Fucking Trans Women*, Mira Bellweather

*Trans Sex Zine Vol. 1 and Vol. 2*

*Learning Good Consent*, Cindy Crabb

*Fucking Magic zines*, Clementine Morrigan

*Linked: A Polyamory Zine*, @daemonumx

*The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*, Larry Mitchell

Mistress Syndrome by Amanda Gross, [www.misstresssyndrome.com](http://www.misstresssyndrome.com)

## Footnotes

[1] Which is the way that disease looked on me; the poison of this culture is that only the eating disorders of skinny white women are believed; a person can be ill and starving at any size.

[2] This was excised from the original 1947 printing, and only later, and occasionally, put back in. From page 139 of the 1992 edition of *Anne Frank; The Diary of a Young Girl*: “I asked her whether, as proof of our friendship, we should feel one another’s breasts, but she refused. I go to ecstasies every time I see the naked figure of a woman, such as Venus, for example.”

[3] It was no surprise to me, but a tremendous relief simply because it’s so *logical*, to learn that, in Israel in the 1960s, there was an explosion of pornographic literature set in concentration camps and featuring Nazis in dominant roles; see Ari Libsker’s documentary *Stalags* or Michael J. Hoffman and Andrew S. Gross’ “Holocaust Pornography: Obscene Films and Other Narratives” for more.

[4] The descriptions of slavery in Exodus and elsewhere throughout the Torah were used by slaveholders in the Americas to legitimate their violence. For more see “The Bible, Slavery, and the Problem of Authority” by Sylvester A. Johnson in *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming its Religious and Sexual Legacies* (2010), edited by Bernadette J. Brooten and Jacqueline L. Hazelton and published by Palgrave MacMillan.

[5] *Persistent Survival: On Transness, Non-Conformity, and Sexual Violence*, hosted by the Fair Moans Collective with a grant from Sisters PGH at the Persad Center in Pittsburgh, PA, April 6 2019.

[6] And in my case particularly, as a white person and a settler.

[7] As much as my being or even my flesh is separate from any other’s. I am all virus and microbiome, all my speech a reworking of and reckoning with the poems others have planted in me.

[8] My Jewish ancestors became white by performing anti-Blackness, and I am whitest when (their) anti-Blackness benefits me. Whiteness, many have written, constitutes itself in opposition to Blackness, and then disappears.

[9] Whose writing on care, intimacy, disability, relationships, decolonization, identity, and sexuality have influenced me profoundly—especially *CARE WORK*, *The Revolution Begins at Home*, and *Dirty River: A Queer Femme of Color Dreaming Her Way Home*.

[10] I only mention his gender specifically because our respective genders were particularly relevant to the dynamic I’m describing in the essay. For me there’s often something a bit freer initially in sex with other trans people because we have to let go of certain social narratives just to get to a place of naming transness in ourselves at all (I am by no means the only person to write or say this), and I don’t want to objectify/unnecessarily categorize partners if it’s not relevant—especially because of the cultural fetish of speculating about what is happening between trans people’s legs.



# Ugly and Underfoot: The Colonization of Animals

**BRENDA PETERSON**

“**P**EOPLE IDENTIFY WITH ANIMALS WHO ARE the most like us,” an editor once advised me, then added with a wry laugh, “Remember, your readers are human, not animal.” I was writing about a childhood encounter with a rattlesnake—the editor’s least favorite creature. Fear, blame, even a bit of religious prejudice about the serpent-as-devil informed her critique. But my experience with a snake was radically different. Once as a toddler, when trailing after my father on our U.S. Forest Service lookout station in the High Sierra, I curled up on a warm rock. Sleepily I found myself eye-to-eye with a rattlesnake. Slowly, the rattler, gold and coral, coiled around my wrist like those bracelets my mother sometimes wore. I stretched out and let the snake nestle on my belly, her tongue touching me like a light tickle of grass. We slept together in the mountain sunshine.

Suddenly my father was above us, raising a large stick. Hissing, he thwacked the air and lifted the rattlesnake off my chest. Whip-like, he wrapped her around a silver fir tree. Terrible snapping sounds cracked like dead branches as her long spine shattered. I screamed. Silence. I wept as I watched my father hack off the snake’s rattler—a present for me that I would never play with.

This rattlesnake bond always haunted me. My almost maternal encounter with the rattlesnake was so at odds with my Southern Baptist upbringing, which taught that the serpent and Eve caused “The Fall” and original sin. My childhood religion had colonized the serpent using prejudice and fear to characterize this creature as “the other,” so not worthy of our respect or compassion. But I wondered, what if the rattlesnake meant me no harm, just wanted the warmth of another body? What if the

serpent—before such a bad religious rep—really was, as Genesis says, God’s “beautiful and subtle creature?”

When I was a teenager, I began having a recurring dream: In a white robe, I enter a hot springs surrounded by other women, who tenderly float me in some ancient ritual. I am small-boned, dark-skinned, with bright red-and-black serpent tattoos inked along my arms and legs. The women whisper as they bathe me.

*We are losing our ways  
Remember this!*

That’s when I always wake up with such an aching sadness in my chest—the way I felt when the rattlesnake was ripped away from my heart as a child.

It was only when I researched the Goddess religions of the near East that I discovered a non-colonial, non-Christian relationship with snakes. In the book, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland*, by Mary Condren, the author claims that the name Eve, *hawwah*, means “mother of all the living.” But *hawwah* also means “serpent” in many Semitic languages. In pagan cultures, the serpent was a symbol of feminine power, knowledge, of birth and rebirth; the serpent also suggests the intermingling of good and evil, the reconciliation of opposites.

Embracing one’s opposite, respectfully acknowledging “the other,” allowing other cultures that do not mirror our own faith or values, is a perspective our own species is far from practicing. When it comes to colonizing other animals, we most respect those fellow creatures who mimic our own values. This is a form of evolutionary narcissism that has real consequences when it comes to species extinction. We are so self-referential that if an animal

doesn’t imitate or serve us, they are expendable.

As my serpent dreams continued, I apprenticed myself to understanding the real life and value of snakes: As predators of mice, they reduce the spread of Lyme disease; they control populations of rodents; an important link in the food chain, snakes help maintain a healthy ecosystem.

One summer, I visited the Hopi Indian reservation in Arizona to see their reverent snake ceremony. Few non-Hopi have ever witnessed the kiva rituals when priests wash the snakes’ heads as a kind of cleansing or baptism. It is a very dangerous ceremony, but such is the skill and traditional training of the Hopi priests that it is rare for anyone to be bitten. Nor do the Hopi have any antidote for snake venom.

The road to those isolated mesas was a snaking, single asphalt line stretching ahead forever. It was a blazing afternoon, not a cloud overhead. Suddenly a haze shimmered on the horizon. All at once, the sky split open with a zigzag of pale lightning. A long zipper of light followed by thunder seemed to buckle the road under my tires. I stopped and jumped out of the car to stare at the horizon. Bright thunderclouds breached up over the mesas so fast it was like high-speed photography. Tucked under those dark clouds was the far-off hiss and



mists of falling rain as it raced toward me.

It was over, I knew then. The Snake Dance had brought rain, wondrous rain. I had missed the dance, but the blessing now reached where I stood beside the road, raising my arms, palms upward. It rained so hard I could hardly keep my eyes open. Such a downfall. Desert wildflowers seemed to surge up from beneath the sand where they had waited through a summer's drought just for this: the cool, life-giving waters described in the Psalms. I leapt back into the car and drove the last miles to Oraibi.

As I parked and ran up the mesa trail to Oraibi's pueblos set into high cliffs, I saw pools of rainwater caught in ceremonial pottery, in empty metal barrels, in every kind of container imaginable. People from many other tribes still sat, under umbrellas and smiling, atop rooftops.

"Climb up here," one of the older Hopi women invited me. "You'll get a better view."

I didn't see what I'd imagined: no rainbow-cloud headdresses, no Hopi priests with snakes dangling from their teeth as other dancers close behind used feathered snake whips to distract the serpents. I saw no female members of the Snake Clan sprinkle cornmeal over the dancers to signify plant germination and assure their children protection from rattlesnake bite. I saw no gatherers after the dance respectfully carrying the coils of cleansed snakes, called Elder Brothers, to release them back into rocky hideaways. Underground again, the snakes would carry messages to their sacred kin—those prayers for rain and abundant corn.

What I did see was this: a rain-drenched desert soon to be abloom. Grateful rows of Hopi corn plants on cliffs, rooted deep in impossible crev-



ices. Prayer feathers attached with red string to tumbleweeds that blew across the sand like traveling caravans. I saw how the serpent and the people still dwelled divinely together. An intimate, faithful bond I understood from my own first serpent encounter.

Perhaps that's why in my late twenties, my first novel, *River of Light*, ended with a scene of a serpent. The final scene is set in a church of Southern fundamentalist snake-handlers. In that culture, the serpent is roughly and contemptuously handled—even at the risk of a snake bite—to show righteous conquest over Satan's serpent. But when I wrote the scene, I told the story of the fall of the Garden of Eden from the serpent's point of view. The snake, God's wise partner, falls in love with this world and sees this world as perfect, beautiful, beyond any belief. Beyond any of our own limited understanding.

It was that wise serpent who first taught me to see other animals and their lives as equal to my own. As a nature writer, when I later studied dolphins and wolves, I again noticed that because they are "charismatic megafauna," as scientists call them, they are most admired when they echo our own values. Altruistic, matrilineal, expert communicators, dolphins can also engage in physical struggles with one another. But for the most part, they reflect the best of us, what many humans yearn to be. But wolves, like serpents, are maligned. Ironically, wolves are more like us than dolphins. They are highly social, violent, devoted to family, and tribal. Because wolves are also top predators, we see them as competitors. That's why wolves were relentlessly hunted into extinction in America and throughout the world. We project onto wolves our generations of prejudice. Like the serpent, they become despised symbols. Once a



species is colonized, denied as a sovereign nation, we justify any war or extinction.

Yet, even those who kill and dismiss other species can change and learn to respect “the other.” Aldo Leopold, the father of modern ecology, began his U.S. Forest Service career in the Southwest in government “wolf control” or “deer management”—a euphemism for wolf killing. He helped forge a powerful anti-wolf alliance between the government’s Biological Survey agency, cattlemen, hunters, and sportsmen that still exists today. So intense was the young Leopold’s zeal to wipe out wolves that by 1920 he could proudly report that in New Mexico they had officially reduced wolves from three hundred to just thirty in three years.

It was a matriarchal wolf who startled Leopold into a new relationship with wildlife. In *Sand County Almanac*, Leopold reflects upon his younger self: “I was young then, and full of trigger-itch.” Remorsefully he writes, “my sin against the wolves caught up with me . . . I had . . . played the role of accessory in an ecological murder.”

Leopold’s epiphany was vivid, heartbreaking. He recounts the moment in his signature essay,



“Thinking Like a Mountain.” One day Leopold and some friends are lunching on a high rim-rock in the Southwest. They spot a mother wolf, happily greeting her six grown pups. Leopold and his fellow hunters have “never heard of

passing up a chance to kill a wolf.” They take aim. The mountain echoes with the ricochet of their rifles. The wolf family scatters, one pup dragging his leg and disappearing. The mother wolf, wounded, lays on the ground. Does she look up at the rim rock in shock at so many snipers? Or does she simply stare flatly in full knowledge of her fate? As the men scramble down to the riverbank, perhaps she focuses on the solace of rushing water, the rustle nearby of any pups who might have survived her. What is left of her family may have howled out for each other. Or perhaps they hushed and kept a wary silence, as wolves often do when humans come near.

The wounded wolf looks up at Leopold as he leans over her to catch the “fierce, green fire dying in her eyes.” In that eye-to-eye with the wolf, the man is changed forever. He recognizes “something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain.”

What does the mother wolf see in this young man’s eyes at the moment of her death? The man will never again kill another of her kind. Her death will become legend—a rallying cry for those who work to save wolves for new generations.

Anyone who has sat vigil with the dying knows that in an instant—when the eyes fiercely focus, then extinguish their light—that last sight can last a lifetime. The mother wolf’s green eyes may have haunted Leopold for as long as he





lived. She transmitted to him another way of seeing his and her world. After her death, when Leopold considered “the newly wolfless mountain,” he realized the wild

without wolves represented defoliation, the “deer herd dead of its own too-much.” Leopold imagines the wild wolf from the point of view of the mountain.

Leopold didn’t live to see the successful reintroduction of wild wolves to Yellowstone in 1995 and the surprising science that shows how wolves balance the ecosystem: Streambeds and willows are restored, beavers and songbirds return, deer and elk remember their “healthy fear” of top predators and no longer overgraze. Yet our prejudice remains. Wolves wandering out of Yellowstone Park are often shot. There is a scientifically premature proposal now in Congress to strip protections from gray wolves.

That editor’s advice to write about animals only as mirrors of our own culture holds true. We still colonize other species in our stories, our religion, our conservation policies by valuing how much they reflect and serve us. This is not always true of children. They can be enthralled by a banana slug, a snake, or a rock. Everything is alive and inviting relationship. Recently, Caldecott Award-winning illustrator Ed Young and I submitted a new kid’s book, *Catastrophe by the Sea*, to editors. In partnership with the Seattle Aquarium, our hope was to inspire empathy for often overlooked, but essential, tidepool creatures. As a storyteller, I knew I had to find a way into their alien world that is so unlike ours. I created *Catastrophe*, a lost cat and bully on the beach who discovers barnacles

and sea anemones as friends; they teach him the superpowers of survival at low tide.

“We love the charismatic cat,” several editors responded. “But lose the tide pool creatures. They’re boring. No one wants to read about a barnacle.”

“There’s a reason beachcombers step on barnacles and anemones,” another editor pointed out. “They’re ugly and underfoot. Who cares about them?”

We chose to go with the publisher who realized that the tidepool creatures were also main characters, not only in our story, but also vital to the ocean ecosystem we all share.

It’s only when our stories embrace other species who aren’t just like us that we begin to “see the world truly,” as the Hopi Indians teach. Hopis believe they dwell at the Center of the Universe, having journeyed through many migrations into this “World Complete.” Our world is completed when we can step outside our own projections and recognize other cultures, animal or human, as worthy and essential in their own right. If we can enter and imagine another animal’s life, contemplating the world from that diverse point of view, we mature as a species. We don’t colonize other animals, we celebrate them. ●



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# Don't Flush Peace Down the Toilet!

SARAH THOMPSON NAHAR

It's the end of the world as we know it,  
it's the end of the world as we know it,  
it's the end of the world as we know it,  
and I feel fine!

—REM

**T**ikkun readers are drawn to notice and respond to the suffering we sense in the planet, in people, in beings great and small during these times—gun violence, displacement of humans, oceanic health indicators noting climatic danger.

In the face of this we either “feel fine” via coping mechanisms that numb, distract, strike-out, or insulate, or, we do not feel fine. Resisting the urge to consume ourselves to sleep, we grieve, strategize, organize, and write...participating however we can in movements to slow down the damage. Spiritual activists can end up running from meeting to meeting because there is “so much shit to do!”

It is abundantly clear that all of us must bring forth what is deepest in our shared humanity to face the threats to life together, so that a few people don't have to do so much heavy lifting.

And one thing that is deepest in our shared humanity is not only metaphorical, it is material as well: humans poop and pee. The phrase “beginning with the end in mind” takes on a tangible meaning when we think literally about the unused nutrients that come out of our bodies.

On the metaphorical level we see the impact of people who “haven’t dealt with their own crap” or “treat people like crap.” Our movements would be stronger if participants tended their internal wellbeing and sought to heal the hard things that block them from being flexible and tender in their power. And people leave movements if they are treated poorly or their concerns are neglected. Bowels and shit symbolize these ideas well. Oft taken for granted, bowels are organs that steadily work to digest all that comes their way. And if they are hurting, the whole will (eventually) shut down. And the devaluing of human shit in mainstream society leads to cultures of disposability in all sectors. I believe that our social movements, institutions,

organizations, etc. mirror our bowels: when something is stuck, it is not good.

Considering the metaphor’s origin it is crucial to think about our physical crap. Where is our poop going every time it leaves our bodies? Is it headed to nourish the land, or will it go in a waterway or landfill? Who makes decisions about how this happens?

Wastewater systems in the Global North perpetuate systems of separation. Inadequate sanitation systems in the Global South perpetuate impoverishment and poor health. Both are similar to how other systems of oppression operate and interlock with other systems at a level that is beyond individual control and at the same time rely on each individual’s complicity.

My hope is that we begin to include defecatory justice in our efforts for access, sufficiency, and decolonization. I call it the “back-end of the food justice movement.”



Beginning to reflect on our crap personally (metaphorically and literally) will deepen our spiritually-based activism for collective liberation. It's time to lift the lid on this conversation, across lines of class, race, ability, geography, age, and more. From little on up, we are told not to use "bathroom words" in the formal western public as it creates discomfort because it's not considered polite. Some people experience talking about bowel patterns as a deeply personal conversation, or they feel shame or embarrassment.

Books like *Everybody Poops!* and Shawn Shafter's "Assume the Throne" art play have helped bring the topic out of the water closet (though the book assumes all humans have a sitting-style flush toilet and use paper to clean, which is not true). But for the most part our collective reluctance has made sanitation subjects taboo and constipated most innovation in this crucial area. Just as HIV/AIDS can't be addressed without a frank conversation about sex, sanitation cannot be addressed without a frank conversation about shit. If we don't, we can flush peace—now and in the future—down the toilet.

On one hand, many people worldwide lack sanitation basics. According to reporters on the Millennium Development Goals, one in three people—2.5 billion—have no stable sanitation facilities. That's 30% of the world without an adequate crapper. The problem here is that poop carries passengers. If left untreated, such as happens with open defecation, diseases will spread. One of the main implications of this is diarrhea—what in the overdeveloped world is usually considered a nuisance that can happen from bad carry-out food—in other parts of the world, it is deadly. Over 2,000 children under 5 years old die of diarrhea each day—it's the second biggest killer of children worldwide.

The euphemisms sometimes classify the causes

of diarrhea as water-borne illnesses. And many countries that have sanitation issues spend a lot of their money on freshwater supply. Rose George, author of *The Big Necessity: The Unmentionable World of Human Waste and Why It Matters*, travelled the world to collect data and stories on the subject. She notes:

Many NGOs focus on water rather than sanitation because the public image of fresh water springing up out of a pipe is more exciting than showing a stoic, dignified toilet. No one will say no to fresh water; it's important, but without adequate sanitation, the fresh water supply will quickly become contaminated by dirty fingers and feet. (TBN 2008, page 60)

The flush toilet was a brilliant invention and "every dollar invested in sanitation has brought an average of \$7 return in health costs averted and productivity gained." (*ibid*, page 72). But there is a severe lack of funding for the required revolution in this area. The Millennium Development Goal indicators for the subpoint on Sanitation are abysmal, the most behind of any of the goals.

On the other hand, in the flushed and plumbed world you poop and it "goes away." I watched a newly potty-trained child once who had learned to say "bye bye!" to their poo as it whooshed away. But where is away? There is no place called "away." Some place receives our refuse. But you'd be fooled living in the United States of America; Global North city & state architecture is designed to facilitate separation from the extreme consequences of our mundane actions by the push of a button, the jiggle of a handle, or the click of a mouse.

We must care about the place that is away and the people and beings who live there. Trash export internationally and sewage shipping domestically are big businesses that impact receiving communities.

In US communities with combined sewer systems, normally lines from household waste, field runoff, and industrial wastewater meet at a treatment plant, where the sewage is treated and then discharged into a water body. But when sewers meet capacity—like during a major rain event—many systems bypass the treatment plant and dump directly into the water to avoid sewage backup in residential homes. So, very frankly, rather than make us deal with our mess, systems are designed to push it all downstream.

I participated in decolonization work alongside First-Nations folks in Canada. As we worked side by side for change, indigenous leaders challenged some of the settler-religion that got forced upon them, saying, “Christians say do unto others as you’d have them do unto you.” We say yes to that, but we also have always recognized that humans aren’t the only ones in the flow, and it’s deeper than that. We say, “Do unto those downstream as you’d have those upstream do unto you.”

Who is downstream of you? What are they experiencing metaphorically and materially from our disposable-heavy society? What does it mean for you to flush your crap onto them? This is the golden rule literally translated into our water systems.

There are some working on technical solutions. From success in a few cities with “smart pipes” to the Gates Foundation’s call to “reinvent the toilet,” smart people are innovating. But these are technological solutions to what is a social issue at the root.

The social issue is that we’ve chosen to create two problems out of one solution (as radical agrarian writer Wendell Berry would say). One problem is after depleting soil through how we grow food for human and animal consumption, we further deplete it by not returning our leftover nutrients to that soil. The second

problem is that as the temperatures are rising and the whole world is looking for fresh water to drink, we sit and poop in our fresh water, then use more resources to re-separate the poop and freshwater. Solutions include water re-cycling/greywater systems, or mainstreaming composting toilets that do not use water to flush but use an absorbent natural material to cover, turning “waste” into a resource that can go through a natural, tended process to break down into soil again.

Our flush toilet dependence has gone into excess; it is the household appliance that uses the most water. The increasing scarcity of clean fresh water has been and will continue to be a driver of conflict and violence. When water and sanitation basic needs cannot be met, or met adequately, this creates grievances that can be mobilized in any population. Many municipalities note that aging sanitation infrastructure is emerging as the largest budget item. If you think politics from local to national is quite contentious now, imagine the shit-slinging of the future!

Moreover, when water becomes unavailable or polluted, human life comes to an end in that place. Many refugees have left home because there is no water, or access is controlled by coercion. The solution to sanitation issues, however, cannot be to only provide everyone a flush toilet and/or expand a model based on the Global North’s underground system that requires a steady volume of water. This would exacerbate already intense situations worldwide.

Molly Winter of ReCode calls this reframe “advanced potty training,” speaking to the need for daily diligence if we want to adjust habits and our thinking, etc. One source that we can turn to with regards to our habits is spirituality and/or religious rituals that ground us in how the actions of our daily lives form the charac-



ters we are. Although much “Western” religion diminishes the body, even these movements have some rituals that can be helpful.

In Judaism, the Asher Yatzar is a prayer recited upon leaving the bathroom. This prayer comes in a series of blessings generally done upon waking up in the morning, following on blessings for the miracles of opening your eyes for the first time that day, your feet touching the floor for the first time, etc. Many of us head to the bathroom at that point and this is the prayer blessing to say upon finishing our daily duty:

Blessed are you, Adonai our God, ruler of the universe who formed humans with wisdom and created us with openings and hollows and tubes. It is clear in the presence of your glorious throne that if one of them were ruptured or if one of them were blocked it would be impossible to stand before you and praise you for any length of time. Blessed are you Adonai, who heals all flesh and acts wondrously.

A letter to people involved in the early Chris-

tian movement emphasized how each member of the worshipping community in Corinth was like a member of the body, and how all are necessary:

If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body... If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?... The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that *seem* to be weaker are indispensable... God has so arranged the body giving greater honor to the inferior, so that ... the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

The humble bowel movement can ground us in gratitude, reminding us that just as our body parts are connected, we are connected to all beings and all parts of the social movement for *tikkun olam*. That thankless jobs matter, and noticing them attunes attention to what is easily forgotten because it is not valued publically. This blessing and passage can help us recognize that shit is holy, scat is sacred, and slowly liberate our mindset about what we call waste.

Liberation theology also deeply resonates with ecological sanitation. Liberation theology flips religious concepts distorted by centuries of classism and exclusivity. It looks to the margins and grassroots for theological answers instead of a reified hierarchy. Building on this, SOIL Haiti practices liberation ecology. Similar to liberation theology, liberation ecology recognizes that solutions that are accessible for folks on the margins tend to work for everyone, while solutions that work for the center tend to be inaccessible or unworkable for those on the margins. Liberation ecologists have noticed that the most threatened and marginalized

human beings will generally be found living in similarly threatened ecosystems.

Often mobilizing a multi-species analysis that draws on earth's wisdom, liberation ecologists dedicate themselves to learning about the vulnerabilities and resilience methods of frontline communities. SOIL Haiti are world leaders in Container Based Sanitation who are learning together with Haitian urban communities on how to restore their environment by transforming dangerous pollutants into valuable resources. They developed a closed poop loop model that involves clean container delivery and used container pick-up, then processing to convert the poop and milled sugar cane into a soil amendment that produces a 15% higher yield and healthier food, which then people eat, and excrete again and the cycle continues. We can apply those lessons for our home environments.

Rose George notes in a 2013 TED Talk that the material of excrement itself “is as rich as oil and probably more useful.” She went on to explain that

It contains nitrogen and phosphates that can make plants grow and also suck the life from water because its nutrients absorb available oxygen. It can be both food and poison. It can contaminate and it can cultivate. So we need to be careful, and we can be if people get more comfortable talking about poop and sanitation; we can have a calm discussion about what to do.

Humanure is brown because of the abundant amount of carbon in it; if we get that into the soil it can bind to the minerals there. It will also absorb carbon dioxide from the air. With proper planning and monitored processes that pay attention to industrial and pharmaceutical cross contaminants, in the future we could fertilize half or all our food, reducing dependence on fossil-fuel based fertilizers.

We're not there yet—or anymore—as there are remote places and cultures already practicing ecological sanitation—but thinking about where our poop and pee goes is the first step in activating our ability to talk about it. The change seems hard to do, but it is necessary. Transforming our systems is safer than staying with the status quo.

So, at times when it feels like “the end of the world as we know it” means annihilation, the destruction of everything we love, remember that if we really deal with our shit—on all levels—then the end of the world as we know it might just mean the end of the oppressive status quo, the designing for a holistic existence in the ecosystems around us, and the dawning of a world where all have their basic needs met. This is an end we can welcome. ●



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# Tale of the Modern Refugee

LIPIKA PELHAM

IN THE SPRING OF 2018, I MET A SYRIAN refugee serving in a canal-side bar in Amsterdam. I would not have known she was of Syrian origin. My companion, a Dutch Sephardi Jew, about whose ancestors I was writing a book, told me that she worked with Syrian and Yazidi refugees to help them integrate into Dutch society. She knew the young woman was from Syria as she recognized the accent.

My friend asked the waitress more specifically when she came back with our drinks, and her reply was affirmative. She came to Amsterdam in 2016, with the influx of refugees displaced by Islamic State (IS) fighters causing havoc in the Middle East.

But the hazel-eyed woman, in her early 20s, added that her “refugee” status did not interest her. She was studying in a Dutch university

and would not want to be seen as anything but Dutch, which should happen soon, once she had sufficiently got rid of the Arabic twang from her speech.

“How do you feel being in Amsterdam?” My friend asked her.

“I feel almost Dutch, and free at last from the memory of war,” she said, exuding self-confidence and determination. I couldn’t help thinking that for her, feeling Dutch was synonymous to laying claim to her new freedom. My friend was pleasantly surprised at the speed at which the young Syrian had found her place as a successful immigrant. Her role as a Dutch teacher to help refugees from the latest Middle Eastern war assimilate into their new life in this northwestern European city seemed redundant.

My companion should not have been so taken

aback; after all, 400 years ago, her ancestors—Iberian Jews forcibly converted to Catholicism—had arrived in Amsterdam as religious refugees and claimed Dutch identity. Their odyssey—in search of freedom of expression, economic success, and self-determination in seventeenth-century Europe—is redolent of the many tales of war and displacement in the modern world, from former Yugoslavia to Afghanistan to Syria to Iraq to Libya to sub-Saharan Africa. The following essay will try to shed light on a recurring reality of migration: the history of displacement can sometimes be the history of reaching new horizons. But it can also turn the other way—when irreversible tragedies happen. So what can be done to prevent shameful occurrences such as slavery, the Holocaust, anti-immigrant race riots, and so on from repeating? We’re passing through a moment in history when communal identity is gaining momentum again. Talk of identity politics is frequently in the news and immigrants purportedly “destroying” cultural continuity is on the minds of many people. Has the modern world lost its identity? Which invites a counter-argument: is “identity” static, or does it change from age to age, generation to generation, as dissolution of old power systems and empires gives birth to new enfranchisements and new definitions of selfhood?

The New Christians who came to Amsterdam sought freedom in the Protestant republic, appropriated and enhanced early modern European thought, contributing significantly to usher in the Enlightenment. For the Sephardim of Iberia, the cultural and philosophical movement of Western Europe was synonymous to progress, and mastering that was their passport to belonging. This required adoption of the etiquette and decorum of their host society, becoming as Dutch as possible, emulating the manners and costume of their adopted nation. Soon, they’ll be painted by Rembrandt



A painted metal mural attached to the Mexican side of the US border wall in the city of Heroica Nogales, Sonora. The mural is titled “Paseo de Humanidad” (Parade of Humanity) and was created by artists Alberto Morackis, Alfred Quiróz and Guadalupe Serrano. It depicts the struggles and harsh realities of economic refugees traveling through the Sonoran desert to reach the US. Image courtesy of Jonathan McIntosh/Flickr.

and the world shall not see a difference between the immigrant Jew and a well-dressed Dutch burgher.

In the societal language this will be described as a successful story of assimilation—something that’s expected by the host nation of the immigrants who are given refuge. In the pre-globalization age this happened frequently, when migrant communities were desperate to rise above the prison of their origins. That was the only route to escape from the memory of persecution, poverty, and despair. By doing so, by their imitation of Western values, the émigrés also lost their original culture, their songs and liturgy, the laughter, and cries of the land of their birth.

But, in a globalized world, with the information of multiple immigrations, journeys, and displacements of co-religionists readily available in real time, the new arrivals are not obliged to imitate the Western way of life as obediently as they were in the past. Or to put it this way, social media offers the modern refugee an immediate “agony aunt” to confide in, to discuss their woes, share their ordeal with fellow migrants from the same geographical or other less technologically advanced locations. In this unity in dispersion, the refugees are less likely to abandon their former way of life, less likely to crave for the favours of the

West's moral superiority. In fact, in many cases, they cling to and even invent a more traditional way, by piecing together the diasporic experience and memories of their ancestral home. This trend usually gets stronger among the second or third generation immigrants, reluctant unlike the first arrivals, to base their identity on the approval of their culture by the Western society in which they live. The host nation's tolerance is put to the test; it starts to feel unnerved by the temerity of the emigrant's progeny. The neo-Islam or neo-Judaism of the Muslim and Jewish diasporas do not fit in with the older versions that their more cautious ancestors pursued. Historically, immigrants kept the public following of the Western way of life and the private worship of their faith separate.

Today, they feel they no longer need to do that. In fact, this trend to defy the parroting of Western behaviour and dress code had already begun in the previous century and matured in the second half of the 20th century with the civil rights movement. Taking advantage of the wave of the Western liberal progressive consciousness, the emigrants started to show an undaunted streak that had previously been suppressed by their attempt to appear as "good citizens." To fit in, one had to be Western educated. Here began a three-way tug of war—emancipated immigrants versus western progressive liberals versus self-proclaimed protectors of European culture.

The question is, in today's world, must we monitor the rise of cultural chauvinism for racist self-righteousness? In light of the rise in recent years of virulent anti-Semitism, hate talk, and Islamophobia, it's important to know how to introduce new cultures that immigrate

to traditional societies through globalization and mass migration. Not everyone will be like the Syrian waitress, who's following the old example of breaking free from the prison of her origins and fully integrating into the more economically potent and stable European society. She is trying to pass herself off as Dutch, in order to belong. But, we also have those—and they constitute the majority of the émigrés in our time—who share what they believe to be their ancestral cultures with fellow immigrants scattered in various host nations. Both the assimilated immigrants and those who try to preserve their traditional cultures are seeking safety and security in their adopted home. But there are some angry voices, in particular among the second or third generation children of migrants who say this is payback time for the former colonials. That the West has long been thieving, usurping wealth, enslaving

“Both the assimilated immigrants and those who try to preserve their traditional cultures are seeking safety and security in their adopted home.”

people, and creating a labor catchment area out of non-capitalist societies, calling them un-progressive, backward, unenlightened. Therefore, it's time for those societies, since they have been displaced and dispersed by colonialism, to turn the

tables on the West. This voice of anger became more audible following the 9/11 attacks and the reprisals that followed.

As the descendants of migrants are trying to fit in so not to suffer the wrath of Islamophobia in the West, they have secretly forged a stronger alliance with their ancestral heritage that their parents and grandparents had forsaken to assimilate. The strength today comes from the unity of the historically oppressed through the thread of the social media. The new generation of Muslims proudly wear the headscarf; families with children flock to the mosque in white

robes, skull caps, and burqa for Friday prayers. Only two or three decades ago, Islamic clothes were frowned upon by urban Muslims in the Middle East and by Muslim immigrants in the West.

While the protectors of the European and essentially Christian culture are waging an anti-immigration war with some saying migrants must leave or assimilate, a pressing topic of the age has been cultural appropriation—propagated by the historically oppressed as well as Western progressive liberals. The first group, consisting of the émigrés, is calling to reclaim their heritage from adulteration or “appropriation” by Westerners, while the progressives are supporting this cultural repossession campaign from the standpoint of historical guilt.

Interestingly, among the warriors for the protection of Western values, we have an impressive number of unlikely soldiers coming from the descendants of migrants. There are writers, polemicists, and artists who tend to think progress means Westernization. Not just visibly in terms of what one wears—in that sense the modern world including the vociferously anti-Western societies in the Islamic world are un-debatably Westernized when it comes to the public profile of men in their suit jackets, ties, and shiny brogues—but also in their outlook and values, which the “Westernized” equate with freedom of speech and sexual liberation. They say stop blaming the West for colonialism, the immigrants must respect the culture of the place they’ve chosen to settle in.

The Western cultural protectionists have openly voiced their opposition to women in black burqa walking down the high street, end of Passover service wafting out of the neighborhood synagogue, Friday prayer call from the end-of-the-road mosque. The predominant thought on their minds is that these people are here to pollute the mainstream culture, which

is basically rooted in Western Christianity. We hear them retort: why on earth is the woman in burqa here when she could have just stayed in her home country and appeared in her walking tent? The stark reality, which the mouthpiece for Western superiority is oblivious of, is that for the man in a white robe, black coat, or skull cap in New York or London, the woman in a wig, hijab, or long skirt in Paris or Brussels, *this is* their home. They are the diasporic nations created by globalization and Europe’s colonial past.

I’ve heard comments such as the above from many of my “progressive” friends and, to my great surprise, I, a first-generation immigrant myself in London who successfully imitated the Western culture, joined in the chorus of disapproval at the unassimilated sore thumb in our cultural continuity. The visible differences of the diasporic defiant are accompanied by elements of an “other” culture—esoteric, bold, and sometimes provocative. The cultural chauvinist and even the progressive liberal in the West are disconcerted by the call to prayer, demand for halal food in state schools, and introduction of non-Christian religions to students. I must admit when my youngest child came home from his London primary school with a library book called *Mosque School* that talks about a little boy in a Muslim Sunday school, I was at a loss for words. It was a difficult test: it challenged my own inherent intolerance for something I didn’t understand and therefore didn’t approve of—a legacy of the cultural superiority that had been instilled in the immigrant generation that strove to be Western to be invisible.

The migrants of today are proud of their origins, or what they believe to be their ancestral culture. There has been a steady process of re-identifying with and reclaiming of one’s perceived heritage.

A fascinating byproduct of Western cultural

supremacist view is the empowerment of the migrants who came to its shore as refugees, fortune seekers, remnants of the formerly colonized and enslaved. It reached its peak in the 1960s, in the post-colonial soul-searching in the Western academic and artistic social milieu. The culture of looking but not seeing crept in as the “exotic” communities were tolerated for a while amid the post-war euphoria, but not accepted into the Western culture.

If colonialism hadn't happened, perhaps the world, as it would have naturally progressed in science and technology, would have seen a voluntary, amicable sharing of knowledge and skills between like-minded scholars, explorers, traders, and fortune seekers, without the battle of whose culture is superior and who is accused of cultural theft or appropriation. Human interaction—on a mercantile, artistic, or spiritual level—need not have gone through forced population movement and mass resettlement of non-Europeans in European countries that had been using vast sections of Africa and Asia as a labour catchment zone.

The descendants of the colonies coming to settle in the West is Europe's own doing, say those who believe it's time for the West to take responsibility for the

historical harms caused by colonialism. The argument used in response is: decades have passed since the end of colonialism, the end of slavery, where's the sense of self-awareness of the formerly colonized and enslaved? Hasn't the time come to move on?

Moving on is surely happening, but not on the terms as the historically-privileged Europeans understand. The generations that emerged from the enslaved and disenfranchised, the Holocaust, and the many other post-colonial genocides following the fragmentation of their homelands are choosing to exert their power and influence and set their own destiny. The terms and conditions for writing down their names in modern history are set by them. Against this trend, the concept of cultural barricade could be understood. What individual and group identities mean to the migrants must be decided by them only.

Where does it come from, this uninhibited display of cultural defiance, without fear of ostracism or sanction by the West's moral superiority? Without caring about the parameters of the Western civilization, and forsaking the emigrants' age-old urge to belong to the host societies by internalizing their cultural standards?

I, from that point of view, am a weakling, a typical product of the colonies who had been programmed to think like, act like, eat like, and dress like the perfectly assimilated immigrant. And when I don't automatically guess, for example, the name of the composer of a piece of European classical music, I hide in the outsider's usual sense of ignominy that I have a long way to go before I can properly belong. It never occurs to me, as it doesn't to millions of others who are desperate to belong to their former colonial societies, that most Europeans would not know a thing about the other, non-European civilizations unless they are academics in particular fields of studies. If I played a piece of an Indian Raga to a regular European listener, would he or she feel any kind of shame for not knowing the name of the composer?

But I would not even ask these questions. I am well-trained in Western tradition; even in



Image courtesy of Roberto Trombetta/Flickr.

my rural school as a child I could name chronologically the entire British Royal family. My grandmother had the portraits of three generations of the Royals that had spanned her life on her bedroom wall. I have appropriated the English language until it pushed aside my perfectly complex mother tongue in which I wrote my first novel. In fact, I would not like to engage in this debate. I am comfortable in my new life, my new clothes, my mother tongue vanishing into a distant memory of nursery rhymes sung by my grandmother. I thrive in the life I created for myself.



I hear a clamour of voices around me with a specific grievance: the West must delve into the tragic events in history—slavery, segregation, colonization, targeted killings, and so on, which forced the modern

refugee to take a steadfast approach to cultural determination and establish a clear definition for their brutalized selfhood. Their parents and grandparents gave up their cultural continuity and mother tongue in order to belong, but their children and the children's children still find they have a long way to go before full integration and acceptance.

Perhaps this makes me a coward, or to add some dignity, I've adapted well. But this can no longer be accepted as the natural aspiration of the outsider. When the brutality of colonialism, the crimes of slavery, the violence of the holocaust are held against the unimaginable losses of integrity and history of the victims, the new cultural defiance of the outsider can be explained. It is in fact cultural self-determination that runs through the vein of today's new immigrants searching for identity.

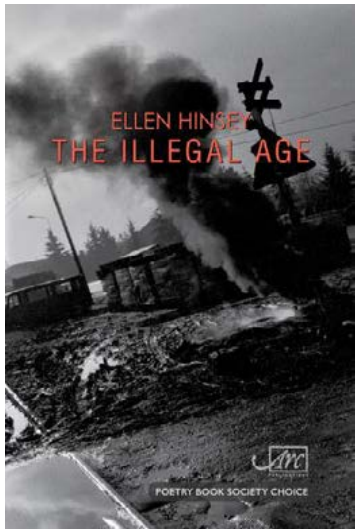
They are so frequently despised for their religions and habits that they often react to the West flaunting its superiority by celebrating their differences, in clothes in particular. Clothing with religious symbols attached—the hijab, the burqa, the niqab, the kippa, turban, black coat, long white robe, and so on—has been the de facto definer of the process of self-making of historically ridiculed people. The trend has been more prevalent in Europe than in America. The intense response by a priggish Europe steeped in Christian history to the Islamic or Jewish religious emblems explains the migrants' suspicion of the West: you cannot just take my hummus and laugh at my headscarf. ●

Less than half a century ago, Muslim women would not wear a full-face veil or the burqa in the streets of New York, Molenbeek, London, Paris, or Montreal. The empowerment of the people who historically lived in awe of the rise of the Western naval and technological power and in fear of being called backward, anti-progress, and anti-civilization even as they moved toward assimilation and Westernization, became possible after monumental changes shook the world in the 20th century. The two World Wars and the resultant fall of the European empire, put into question whether what the West thought civilization stood for should be a benchmark for progress for the rest of the world.



**LIPIKA PELHAM** worked in the BBC newsroom for over a decade. In 2005–13, she lived in Jerusalem, where she learnt Hebrew, made award-winning films, and wrote a memoir. Lipika's latest book, *Jerusalem on the Amstel: The Quest for Zion in the Dutch Republic*, talks about how New Christians from the Iberian Peninsula

arrived in 17th-century Amsterdam, reverted to Judaism, and prospered beyond belief. Through their story, the book explores the ideas of migration, nationhood, and identity.



# The Braille of a Restless Lake

REVIEW BY ALEXANDER BOOTH

***The Illegal Age***  
By Ellen Hinsey  
Arc Publications, 2018

Over the last decade and more, poet Ellen Hinsey has been engaged in an unflinching examination of war, tyranny, and their effects on the spirit through works such as *The White Fire of Time* (2002), *Update on the Descent* (based, in part, on her research work at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at the Hague; 2009), her translations of Lithuanian poet Tomas Venclova, and *Mastering the Past* (2017). Her latest work, the harrowing yet darkly beautiful book-length sequence of lyrics and “anti-lyrics,” aphorisms, and file reports, *The Illegal Age* continues the poet’s investigation of what she calls the “autocratic experience.”

This rigorously structured book is divided into three parts, which the poet has named “Investigation Files” and entitled ‘Smoke,’ ‘Ice,’ and ‘Obscurity.’ Each of these parts is either clearly located, or not at all (adding to their dramatic suggestiveness), in a particular historical period and landscape: the Second World War and, specifically, Nazi Germany’s policies of industrialized mass-murder and total war in Poland and Ukraine; post-war/cold-war visions of utopia and its “conquering of the ultimate space // Of the human soul” behind what was once known as the Iron Curtain, in Siberia, East Germany, and Russia; and the early 21st century with its alternative facts, black sites, and drone strikes, nebulous, amorphous, and everywhere. These sections are then legalistically organized into seven sub-sections—‘Report,’ ‘Evidence,’

‘File,’ ‘Internal Report,’ ‘Evidence,’ ‘File,’ ‘Testimony,’ etc.—which seem to imply a gatherer of evidence (the poet? the reader?), while doubling as a framework for the construction of a larger meditation of a moral-philosophical nature. Carrying titles such as ‘On the Rise of the Inconceivable,’ ‘On the Intimate Daybook of Power,’ ‘On the Principles of the New Logic,’ ‘The Four Horsemen,’ ‘The Final Era of Brightness,’ or ‘Elegy for Thought,’ the poems lead us to ask ourselves: how can we bear witness to the previously unimaginable without empowering its creators or employing similarly inhuman language; in what ways does autocratic power manipulate logic and language to undermine individual experience, while continuing its relentless destruction of the individual in general; why is it fundamental that we be able to establish an undeniable series of events, that we be able to answer *who, what, where, when, and why*; to what degree are we voluntarily and involuntarily complicit in destructive pow-



ers' greater program; what, if any, responsibility do we have toward the dead; what good is art at all in the face of our seemingly insignificant individual and collective annihilation?

War never simply "breaks out," and the same can be said of what was previously inconceivable. "Nothing happens quickly: each day weighs on the next / Until the instant comes" the book begins in 'The Illegal Age (Prologue)'. "It takes time for a figure, who makes his slow way along / The foggy lane in innocence, to vanish [...] It takes time // To not suffer the pain of others." So when was the moment, the poet asks, that the inconceivable first sparked? In what hand, which mind? Was it in World War One, that war which claimed the lives of at least 40 million soldiers and civilians, "in the mired trenches / Of winter—when gas laid waste to limbs hidden / In the reaped, tunneled mud"? Indeed both sides used chemical weapons on each other early in the war, but it was the Germans who perfected their use in the development of chlorine, phosgene, and eventually 'mustard' gas, all of which in turn led to the creation of cyanide gas, or Zyklon B, utilized in the death-camps of the Holocaust. Was it there? Or was it later, on "that first September morning" in 1939 when the Germans invaded Poland, just barely more than twenty years after "the war to end all wars," six years after Hitler's election and the immediate institution of decrees and regulations restricting Jews' public and private lives, and not even one year after *Kristallnacht*?

For with the invasion began the mass-murder of civilians, which two years later grew into the creation of special mobile killing squads to target Jews with the invasion of the Soviet Union, and just six



Two American soldiers run towards a bunker by H.D Girdwood.

months after that culminated in the Wannsee Conference, the formal declaration of the "final solution": the systematic deportation and murder of the Jews of Europe in the six extermination camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Treblinka. When was the "precise instant of change" that led to it all? And where? Was there a moment

it could have been avoided, when "a hand might hesitate...Even if one was *under orders*"? For, though nothing happens quickly, "still / There are indications, signposts, turns along the way — // For we must know exactly where it was lost, to erect / There a monument: to the advent of the *Illegal Age*."

And this is just the first poem of the first section. *The Illegal Age* establishes the scope and intensity of its subject quickly and with impressive force.

The second section opens thus: "You could sense it approaching, over the close border: / It did not have a specific homeland, it did not hold // A single passport. But it had been long in the making." Hinsey's book is unremittingly bleak, yes, but it is also beautiful, and this powerful combination commands our attention. She excels in creating strange moments of almost comforting silence, of air, in between and within lines, in having certain words and themes echo and call back to one another throughout the entire book like musical motifs, and in juxtaposing striking moments of lyricism and image against the strict formal structure and solemn subject matter. Consider a title such as 'The Handbook of Smoke,' a line such as "Maybe the end will come unexpectedly, a sudden reprieve: but more likely the body will be felled by the axe of the heart, buried in the nowhere land of



"It takes time for a figure, who makes his slow way along / The foggy lane in innocence, to vanish [...] It takes time // To not suffer the pain of others."



1941, Brest (german-russian border)



exile” (‘File 72194: The North’); or the image “the braille of a restless lake” (‘File 53291: The Denunciation’). A reference guide and collection of signals on disappearance. A life extinguished, undone by memory, heartbreak, the iniquities of banishment and enforced labor, effectively and unequivocally erased. A form of writing for the blind seen in the physical world, a premonition perhaps, intellectually indecipherable if sensually understood.

So what keeps us from giving up on the whole when confronted with such relentlessly grim material? Indeed, what keeps us from giving up on poetry all together? That is, the reading of it and, to begin with, the writing of it? What good is it in the face of the horror? And again, what good is art at all?



The late John Berger noted that both the weeping faces of Picasso’s *Guernica* period and the skulls he drew during German occupation possessed a kind of insolence: the refusal of servitude contained in the very act of having drawn them made them triumphant. And so to unflinchingly confront such material, to live within and with it, to, in the true sense of the word, incorporate it into oneself and “order the evidence” into writing requires not only a great amount of fortitude and faith in the act, but in the very significance of the individual human being and, ultimately, human experience—that is, life—itself. In short, it is to believe that the human being matters. Thus any project along such lines becomes an act of defiance, for the artist as well as audience; it subverts received opinion, group-think, and defensive complacency. As Hinsey writes, “each memory salvaged from tyranny’s flood



is an unsteady, but miracle-buoyed raft” (‘Carved Into Bark’). Which is precisely why, then, she includes and engages in direct and indirect conversation with, among others, Ingeborg Bachmann, Paul Celan, Osip Mandelstam, and Wislawa Szymborska, all poets who both directly and indirectly experienced various forms of twentieth-century totalitarianism: proof of individual but also collective experience they form a greater community for those of us who are still alive. Together their voices say: We saw. We wrote. And in having done so once, do so still. Here. Now. Again, Hinsey: “Remember: in the ink-light of testimony, a record may / still be kept” (‘The Illegal Age (Reprise)’).

Primo Levi reminds us, “It happened, therefore it can happen again.” In our current climate, political and actual, Ellen Hinsey’s *The Illegal Age* is a unique reminder of what we have no choice but to confront. And order. And keep. Over and over again. All the various forms of distraction and ideologically imposed diversion that attempt to strike us dumb are no excuse. “Don’t think your compliance is not being observed,” it says. Remember, it tells us, “The inconceivable first emerges along the periphery. [...] At the outset, it is supported by few—even opposed by many.” Remember, it says, “*Nothing happens quickly.*” ●



**ALEXANDER BOOTH** is a poet and literary translator currently living in Berlin. A recipient of a PEN/Heim Translation Fund grant for his translations of German poet Lutz Seiler (‘in field latin’, Seagull Books, 2016), his poetry and translations have appeared in numerous international print and online journals.

More information at [www.wordkunst.com](http://www.wordkunst.com)

# Jokes That Break the Heart

REVIEW BY BRIAN BOULDREY

**Bruno Schulz**

***Collected Stories***

Translated by Madeline G. Levine

Northwestern University Press, 2018

**Isaac Babel**

***The Essential Fictions***

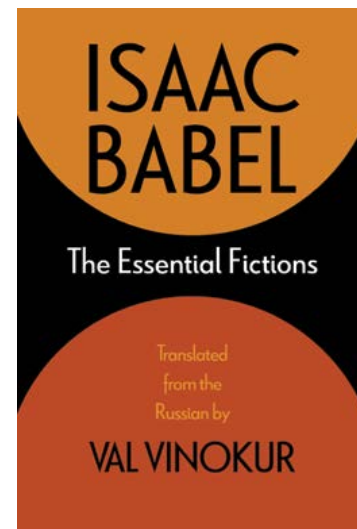
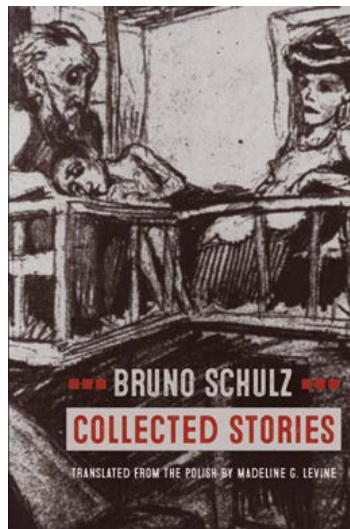
Translated by Val Vinokur

With drawings by Yefin Ladyzhensky

Northwestern University Press, 2017

The most sought-after automobile for the citizens of the Soviet Union was the Volga, adapted from abandoned Nazi blueprints. To get a Volga, as to get anything in those years, was to stand in line for a very long time. A Russian friend's borscht-belt father told me an anecdote about his getting a Volga. "One day I was called to the manufacturer's office. The man behind the desk told me, 'Congratulations, comrade, you have been approved for a Volga. They are making it for you now. It will take five years. When those five years have passed, when would you like to pick up your Volga, in the morning or in the afternoon?' I laughed and said, 'What difference does it make, morning or afternoon?' and he said, 'Well, I have a plumber appointment on that day, so I will have to make my own adjustments according to your choice.'"

The word for laughter in Russian is "смех", and some Slavic linguists suggest that its root is in the word "сметь," to dare. Those who dare to laugh in Russia are bold people who are able to overcome fear and lies with wondrous laughter. Russian faith and strength is built on the basis of laughter.



And where did the Russians get it from? Look to the shtetl, to the borscht belt, where Yiddish folk tales like "The Man Who Slept through the End of the World" and Peretz' "Bontsche the Silent" grew. There is, at the ground floor of this great tower called the "anecdote," an unlikely mix of oral offhand conversation and economical precision. Unlike classic short stories, they rise out of occasion rather than plot, and, despite their brevity, they defy synopsis and have the rhythms and radiances of good jokes; they depend on timing and a sort of script (a priest and a rabbi walk into a bar, etc.), directness, and something like a punchline, or demonic moral, as if Aesop knew from a pogrom.

Neither of the translated writers discussed here wrote in Yiddish, although Yiddish "haunts" both of them. Isaac Babel's characters often speak in a patois of Russian and Yiddish that the translator, Val Vinokur, makes an effort to approximate. Bruno Schulz spoke only German and Polish and backed away from the Jewish community when he became betrothed to a Catholic woman, but still, his work is deeply informed by biblical and cultural references. It may be that, with one foot in Jewishness and the other in the Slavic literary world, they managed to both preserve the former and influence the latter.

For example, Turgenev offers a great compendium of anecdotes in his *Sketches from a Hunter's Notebook*. The sketches begin with the slightest occasions linked to hunting: depending on a drunken peasant to get to the next village; buying a horse; running out of bullets; negotiating with a land-

owner to hunt on his property; getting lost while quail shooting. In “Singers,” Turgenev comes to an Ugly Town where the locals at a pub have pitted two singers against each other to determine which is the most Russian of the singers. After much cajoling, the first belts out a song that provokes the heartless barkeep to tears and it seems nobody could top that. But then the second singer tops that, and the entire room is weeping, proud and sad of their Russianness, and even Turgenev is so moved that he steps outside the pub so that he can hang on to that sad Russian feeling. In the dark he hears a father calling his naughty son. “Antrop-kaaaa!” And after a silence, “Wha-a-at?” “Come heere my pipsqueak!” “Whyyyy?” “Because your dad wants to beeeeat yooouu!”

This coda, this troubling punchline, it would seem, is the heart of the anecdote. As with Yiddish storytelling, the anecdote thrives on both the high language of law and the low language of the outlaw. Instead of a glib moral tacked on to a sermon, the anecdote turns away from preciousness, from the perfect cherry on top, and chooses, instead the dark night where the reader is thrown out of the warm pub with a deeper understanding of life’s rougher truths, in that there are no determinate truths. And the reader, after hearing the lovely songs, likes it, because we can handle only the “premonition of a truth” now.

Chekhov also recognized the power of the dark turn, displayed in anecdotes like “Anyuta,” in which a poor girl passed around by artists and medical school students (of which Chekhov was both) to learn anatomy and figure drawing. She is the center of the story but always marginalized, like a domestic object merely used to an end, all underscored by the last line as she is pushed out for the next student, and stands alone in the hall: “In the passage, someone shouted at the top of his voice, ‘Grigory! The samovar!’” She is as important as a samovar to everybody but the reader.

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And along comes Isaac Babel, to reinvent and rethink the Jewish tradition of Yiddish humor and tale. His ferocious stories, those in *Red Cavalry*

and *My Dovecot* and various uncollected occasions, have been presented in English with three significant translations, the first by Walter Morison in 1955 with Lionel Trilling’s marvelous illuminating introduction, then with Peter Constantine’s “Complete” published by Norton in 2005, more archival than it is artistic, and now with Val Vinokur’s “Essential,” meant by the translator Val Vinokur and Northwestern University Press to be a restoration, of sorts, of the Morison, though it’s a pity that it could not house Trilling’s original forward. Vinokur’s is a wise and nuanced translation that recalls Morison’s understanding of Babel’s delicate take on brutality while selecting from Constantine’s almost frantic effort to “get it all in there,” if in a ham-handed interpretation.

Babel’s life, like his fictions, is a great dialectic, a hundred contradictions and unlikely occurrences that are often stranger than any fantasies with dragons and gnomes. An Odessan Jew, born in an era when Jews were forbidden by law to get a higher education, who got a law degree. For the newspaper pieces that make up *Red Cavalry*, Babel’s central work, he traveled with the Cossacks, the same guys who implemented the pogroms, to observe for a newspaper their actions during a series of battles with the Polish. They called him what we call “four eyes,” what Vinokur translates as “glasses on the nose”: “A real hassle over here if you got glasses,” the quartermaster explains to Babel in “My First Goose,” “...Over here a person of high distinction is done for. But go ruin a lady, a real proper lady, too, then the troops will adore you.” Babel takes advantage of the lawlessness of war to show people who they are without all that properness. He’s eager to impress the Cossacks in any way he can, so he kills an old woman’s goose and reads them Lenin’s speech out of *Pravda*, proving his worth. In those final two lines, almost always a dark coda, he writes with a tone of triumph, “I had dreams (that night) and saw women in my dreams—and only my heart, imbrued with slaughter, oozed and groaned.”

This is the most action Babel sees in the *Red Cavalry* stories. Usually, he is there to observe; you almost forget he is there in most situations,

as is most egregiously exemplified in the deeply troubling story “Our Batko Makhno” (Morison’s title, “With Old Man Makhno,” and Constantine’s, “Makhno’s Boys”). Babel pitches his voice toward a creepy, even defiant casualness in this two-page nightmare with the line, “The night before, six of Makhno’s boys raped the maidservant.” The scene he observes is so grotesque we almost forget Babel’s heartless surveillance behind a curtain, but only almost. Watching, he observes the mentally simple Kikin, known for suddenly flipping himself up to walk on his hands without warning, confronting and even blaming the maidservant because he did not get to be the seventh in the ravishing. “Yesterday, when they caught you, and I was holding you by the head, I said to Matvei Vasilyich, ‘Now this is the fourth one already, and all I’m doing is holding her.’”

Here I must stop and say that, like any good fiction, a story will make my quick synopsis sound merely and lazily glib in the place of the complete work. “A story isn’t any good unless it successfully resists paraphrase,” Flannery O’Connor wrote. Stories are told because a statement would be inadequate. That is why it is difficult and even dangerous for me to write about “Our Batko Makhno.” Anecdotes, like all stories, deliver information that is often impractical, nonsensical, or, specifically here, egregious. But I beg the reader to understand that there is a degree of correctness in surprise that separates good stories from great ones, although that correctness can contain horrifying truths.

Is there an ethical problem worth thinking about in this story? After all, if a Red Cross observer, or a representative from Doctors without Frontiers were witnessing with Babel, the official report would be quite different. But the ethical problem, it strikes me, is one of distance. Here is another terrible anecdote: Mussolini’s son Bruno was in the Italian air force, and, when bombing Ethiopia, leaned out of his cockpit to pathologically enjoy the sight of his bombs exploding below, and described them “come fiori”—“like flowers.” From a distance, violence can be lazily aestheticized. There is no aestheticization in “Our Batko Makhno.” The reader does not come away enjoying anything about the story; the reader

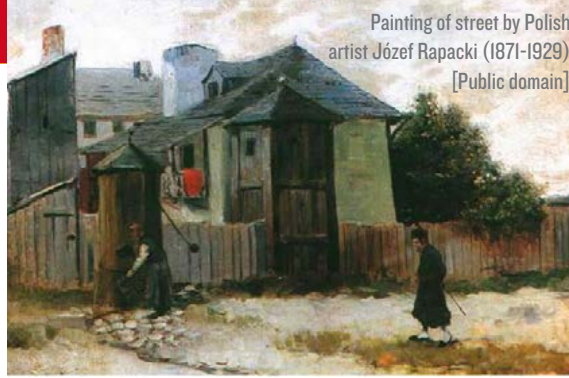
comes away understanding the very nature of violence, being forced to look close. “Love is a long, close scrutiny,” wrote Joyce Carol Oates, no stranger to examinations of violence.

And after all, Chekhov’s objectified Anyuta is treated like a princess compared to the way both Kikin and Babel treat the raped maidservant. And Kikin’s greatest complaint is that he can’t go after Vasya’s gone, “and then cry about it the rest of my life,” presumably because Vasya has syphilis. The maidservant hears this, glares at Kikin, “and walked out of the kitchen with the heavy stride of a cavalryman when he puts his numb legs on the ground after a long ride.”

But Babel is not finished because he’s still hiding behind the curtain, and there is still that last paragraph, that terrible last line, that must be told: “Left by himself, [Kikin] cast a lonesome gaze around the kitchen, sighed, pressed his palms to the floor, threw his legs in the air, and, with his upturned heels perfectly still, quickly walked away on his hands.” Behind this horrifying story is a terrible precision that a good translator must honor, for as Babel once said, “No iron can stab the heart with such force as a period put just at the right place.” This is Babel’s art, after all—he is as direct and obvious as animals, or sex, or Beethoven—for when you listen to some Beethoven, its simplicity gets inside you so quickly that you end up humming along, even when it’s the first time you’ve heard the piece. The translator Vinokur understands this, proof of this being the restoration of the definite article “the” in “I was holding you by the head,” accurately and heart-stabbingly used by Morison in the original translation but lost in Constantine’s unsatisfying if complete translation. In all his depictions of lawless wars and men, Babel is always ordering, but the job is never finished.

Babel’s life, and its end, is not unlike one of his sloppy-precise fictions: over before you know it, and capped with one of his morbid punchlines. As he was arrested and carried off by Stalin’s goons to be tortured and killed in 1939, he complained that he was “never allowed to finish.”

You read Babel’s chaotic horrors and by the time



you finish a phrase, the words are already inside you, as if you were a fish that swallowed the bait, hook and all; removing them will kill you. If there is one criticism of Vinokur's unflinching translation, it would be for his sometimes overly pure refusal to give in to an impossibly precise translation by keeping the word in the original Russian. In "Death of Dolgushov," for example, which, with unrelenting sentences meant to capture the dizzying violent action of battle, we are not quite sure who the enemy is, referred to only as "zlatzka" (essentially, Poles), and the fascinating weirdo Grischuck rides around on his untranslated "tachanka", which is worth describing to the reader as a bizarre oversized tricycle outfitted with an assault weapon. Grischuck stores rotting dry fruit under the seat, a clownish figure in an otherwise grim story of disembowelment, angry Cossacks, and what would seem to be the near-end of Babel himself, rescued by the clown in question. But make no mistake: Vinokur truly understands and respects the Babel that we all need to understand and respect.

If you crave a safe space in literature, you're not likely to find one in his fictions, but you will find life, even in the midst of death—even after it. The thousands of paradoxes and contradictions life holds are held in Babel's anecdotes, and in his own experience: the Jew forbidden to be educated getting the best education; the educated Jew who longs to please the feral Cossacks; the man who craves experiences preferring the hiding place of a voyeur.

Vinokur, a deft and thoughtful translator ("Translation can be a peculiar drug—and, at its heady best, it is indeed ...exhilarating, intimate, crafty, and paramilitary...," he writes in his introduction), has spent a career thinking about Babel, and is the author of *The Trace of Judaism*, a study of Dostoevsky, Babel, and Mandelshtam through the Franco-Jewish philosopher Levinas. In that book, Vinokur asks how Judaism haunts Russian literature, and one could argue that the borscht-belt

derivations of humor are a significant part of that narrative haunting. The key connections between translator and author are those indeterminacies of art: both are Jewish, both are translators, and both are more interested in a premonition of the truth rather than a dead truth.

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Everything is alive in Babel's and Bruno Schulz's stories, especially at the moment of death, and truth is not as important as "Reality [which] is as thin as paper and betrays with all its cracks its imitative character," as Schulz wrote. In the *Collected Stories* of Bruno Schulz, newly translated from the Polish by Madeline G. Levine, that animism expresses itself in tailor's dummies, household objects, lobster-sized cockroaches, and doors. The world is wild, and the world resides within the four walls of Bruno's home, with a father for a god, and a forbidden library for a universe.

Again, occasion prevails over plot in stories that are better considered long anecdotes. In "The Book," the occasion is this: there was a book. "Mother was not there yet," he remembers, but it sounds primordial, mythic even: Fricka/Sara/Jocasta was not there yet. The Book, found in his father's library study, is described here: "Somewhere in the dawn of childhood, at the first daybreak of life, The Book lay full of glory on Father's desk...the Book slept and the wind blew it apart silently like a *centifolia* rose and opened its little leaves petal by petal, eyelid by eyelid, all of them blind, velvety, dormant, concealing in their core, on the very bottom, an azure pupil, a peacock heart, a screeching nest of hummingbirds."

More about this anecdote in a moment, but it is worth comparing the previous translation, perfectly enjoyable, by Celina Wienowska. Levine improves upon Wienowska with subtle strokes—it is not "my father", but "Father", offering distance and awe and, again, a touch of the mythic (operating in the opposite sort of way Babel's "the" operates in "Makho"). Wienowska calls it a "cabbage rose," which has,

arguably, less exotic intonations to the English ear, as opposed to the proper scientific “centifolia.” The pupil is not Wienowska’s direct but general blue, but azure, a little poetic, and that’s what Schulz is.

Bruno the storyteller calls *The Book* a codex, describes all that he is sure he saw and read in there. “...The Book still burned in my soul with a bright flame, a great, rustling Codex, an agitated Bible...” Time passes, and he suddenly wants to see the book again. His parents show him all sorts of books, but not one of them is *The Book*. “My father...said in the tone of a gentle proposition, ‘Fundamentally, there exist only books.’” (Compare to Wienowska; “There are many books.”) “The Book is a myth that we believe in our youth, but with the passing of years one stops treating it seriously.”

Bruno disagrees—those books of childhood, he posits, are the true books, even if they were myths. His own Book is revealed to be something of a tawdry almanac full of quack cures and advertising testimonials, used by the household help to wrap leftover fish. But Bruno will not believe in that reality, it being thin as paper and all. And this is Schulz’s mythology of childhood that haunts us as we step further away from the “roots of things”: there are books from childhood that we could never have imagined on our own that must have been real, and yet we cannot find them, no matter how many used bookstores we haunt (or do they haunt us?). Schulz and Babel are the impossible mythmakers who make myth not by elevating but by bringing the things of the world back to their essentials.

Both writers come from Jewish merchant class families. There are certain opportunities that come with that, but they are not taken for granted, and in fact must be carefully maintained. What sacrifices the parents of both must have made. Babel’s parents are invisible—he lied about them when he spoke of them at all, describing them as failures; Schulz’s are ever-present. Both writers, so lively, sought out life in strange places, and both lives were ended far before we were through with their art. There’s a bit of myth surrounding both and their writing—manuscripts lost, perhaps even used to wrap fish, perhaps one day to be found. The

myth is worth perpetuating, for both of them did not want absolute truth, but the premonition, the root, of truth.

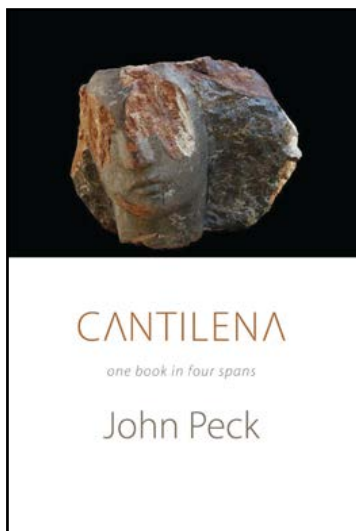
And truth is always strange, as fantastic as anything fantasy can throw at us. In “Father’s Final Escape,” the god of all these anecdotes turns into a crustacean of some sort, who still amuses young Bruno by grabbing small objects and waving them around. His end occurs when mother throws him in a boiling pot and serves him, a death more and less interesting than any other. For death and life are bizarre, why would the reader be any more astonished by this whole crab business?

And Schulz’s own end was as horrifically surreal: in the concentration camp, a pet of the Nazi Felix Landau and kept alive because he painted murals based on Grimm’s fairytales for Landau’s son’s bedroom, he was shot by a fellow officer because Landau had killed his Jewish dentist. “You killed my Jew, I killed yours.” Another nightmarish end to a life and anecdote, just like Babel’s. But the stories are eternal, and both writers have overcome fear and lies with wondrous, daring laughter, telling stories with a drunk’s (Babel) or child’s (Schulz) sloppy precision. Because of this, and because they were neither, they belong among the greats of two distinguished literary traditions: Yiddish and Slavic.

David Grossman wrote ten years ago in an essay called “The Age of Genius” that every Schulz reader has an anecdote about how they discovered Bruno Schulz. The same could be said of Babel. It is these marvelous new Levine and Vinokur translations that, one hopes, will be the occasion of the anecdote for countless new readers, and the occasion of gathering up again the old readers. ●



**BRIAN BOULDREY** is the author of four works of fiction and four nonfiction books, and is the editor of eight anthologies, most recently, *Inspired Journeys: Travel Writers in Search of the Muse*. He is the North American Editor of the “Open Door” literacy series for GemmaMedia and teaches fiction, creative nonfiction, and literature at Northwestern University.



# Poetry and Evil

REVIEW BY GREG MILLER

**John Peck**  
***Cantilena: one book in four spans***  
**Shearsman Books,**  
**2016**

John Peck's *Cantilena: one book in four spans* is a high modernist poem with pleasures not to be found in discursive or narrative prose. I lose myself, I get new bearings. I let go, I find a way. Relishing sound and sense and a dense richness of widening associations and meanings, I read, I feel called to re-read. The experience of the poem's method is at one with its exploration of history, psychology, and morality.

In its abrupt juxtaposition of voices and times, Peck's poem has much in common formally with Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. *Cantilena*, however, shares none of Pound's anti-Semitism, none of his love for Mussolini or strongmen. In his moral focus, his gritty particularity, and his musicality, Peck shares more with that other great modernist poet Basil Bunting, whose *Briggflatts* roots the English poet's life in the place and history of his native Northumberland; "long life dances forth in a living voice," as Donald Hall described Bunting's long poem. A "cantilena," in fact, usually refers to a melodic passage in music; "spans" imply bridge-building. We have a book of linked songs, like cantos, leading us from one bank to another.

With all its music and rootedness, Peck's poem also aims to give us an education. If Ezra Pound had his Hugh Kenner, James Joyce his Stuart Gilbert, we, alas, must perforce be autodidacts. (Thank you, Google!) Reading the book is a slow, moving experience: with sorrows and riches. If you take up the book, you will not reach the end unchanged

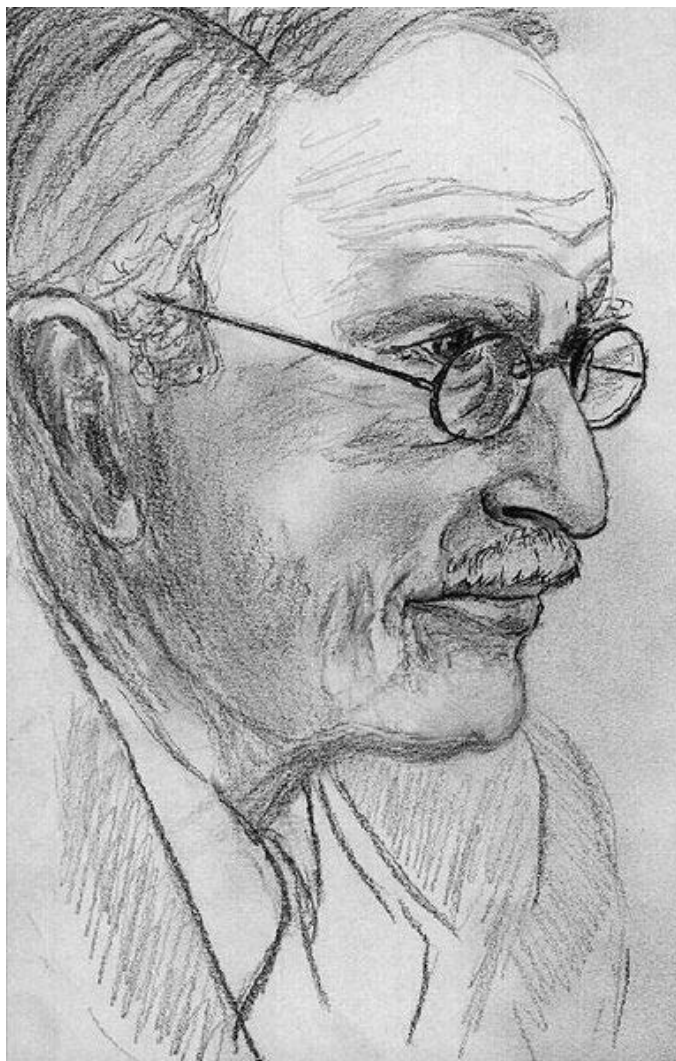
or unbruised. Tenacious, masochistic grit is requisite: pleasure and understanding lead the reader forward, but not without pain, the unfolding of humankind's violence at the poem's core: war, acquisitive destruction of the biosphere, the "despised weakness" that binds the speaker, even if "recalcitrant," and others, to "power" (*The Bewitched Groom: bucking insanity, surviving guilt*, Canto 97).

Weaving our time with other times, *Cantilena* is a fiercely moral poem; moral character often serves as a cord holding the spans. "There is no poetics without ethos" (*Cedars of Liban: sluicing roots*, Canto 19). The book's force comes from clear seeing, exploring complicit, as well as active, evil. To understand the human psyche, Peck became a Jungian therapist. In the poem, we hear Jung cry, "I want evil!" as well as in a parallel passage: "I am to meet / mitzvah only in injustice and destitution, / their pierced gazes" (*The Bewitched Groom: bucking insanity, surviving guilt* Canto 9).

Jung was controversially fascinated with Wotan as a kind of totemic activator of the German nation's collective unconscious ("Erdsprache, / Erdgeist, l'esprit du terrain," *BG* Canto 5). Nicholas Von Flüe's Wotan becomes in one painting "the terrible face of God" in a wheel image, a visionary point where the collective unconscious breaks into consciousness; in Peck's words, Wotan even becomes "an incognito complicit Christ" (*BG* Canto 99). The vision is heretical, offering a way to "integrate" psychologically the forces driving nations, peoples, and individuals; the poem aims to achieve a greater, more realized and integrated self. Freedom is within us. If Pound descended into fascism in his love of the great man, Peck presents us with our collective unconscious made visible—the dark powers of our own national Wotans, if you will—in the service of

freedom, imagining its possibilities and costs. The root of future evil is in us. We must bring it to light.

Peck's resistors are "activators" of a different sort. In *The Bewitched Groom*, the final and earliest written of the four sequences, Peck offers a moving assemblage of heroic individuals who defy national power, often dying in their resolute opposition to injustice. To list only a very few, we meet von Stauffenberg, who attempted to assassinate Hitler (Canto 93); the German-Jewish art historian and poet Gertrud Kantorowicz, who helped others escape Nazi imprisonment, herself dying in Theresienstadt, where she is imagined as reading the Iliad: "*High powers hide, extracting the unthinkable from the hopeless / as through trackless snarls the god found a way, so too this fate*" (Canto 89); the Reverend Colonel William Higginson, Unitarian minister and commander of a black regiment during the Civil War (Canto 98); Hans and Sophie Scholl, student founders of the White Rose Resistance Movement in Germany, decapitated in 1943, Hans's last words being, "Long live freedom!" (Canto 66); Jan Karski, who, having escaped the Katyn massacre and having been smuggled first into the Warsaw ghetto and then to safety in the West, tried unsuccessfully to convince FDR and Justice Frankfurter of the truth of the Holocaust (Canto 20). We are faced as well with American white nationalism in the Peekskill Riots of 1949, in the violent reaction to a concert by Paul Robeson and Peter Seger (Canto 67). The parallels within the poem have



a cumulative effect. We experience larger historical patterns from within lucidly imagined moments in time, perceiving and experiencing parallels without an instructive narrative voice. Our learning and understanding, which must be active in reading the poem, are activated.

In this poetic enterprise, Peck joins alchemy with modern physics and depth psychology. (I doubt it is an accident that George Ripley's poetic and alchemical work was titled *Cantilena*.) Jung was fascinated by Wolfgang Pauli, analyzing his dreams at great length. Pauli was awarded the Nobel for

his work on spin theory and the structure of matter. Peck gives us Pauli's "dream of a world clock, eternity disking through time" (*Caelvum: marching-up country*, Canto 28), a central motif of *Cantilena*. "*Denarius: Squaring Circles*" ends with a reference to an entity "older than the hunters" that we can intuit beneath us:

Yet wait:

time—when the allotted disc  
already hangs chewed off in places,  
or dinged, or dented—time seeps value.  
Even so, deal nobly with time  
and the tsunami will not vacuum your beach  
but bathe your ankles, destroying nothing,  
rinsing no single sense but threshing the basement  
current through all of them.

A stream machine with no moving parts, the rimless  
listening not yet in your ears but already



prayer's underpower, will be yours—  
with the sightless all-directional mercury  
at bulge in the images  
while ebbing at the eye's corner: that too  
pushes the velvety volumeless  
undersensing in sensing. . . .  
(Canto 61)

The poet is alchemist, sounding our psychic, historical, and temporal depths, transforming the reader, calling us to perceive newly. Our charge is “to deal nobly with time.”

In such an imagined temporal nexus, Peck calls into question the particularly American ideal of the autonomous, self-sustaining individual, including the “I” of the poem: “*it occurs* to me—that is, runs in front of me, crosses my path; or else it strikes me, that is, hits, grazes, groves into, or rubs up against me, because ‘I’ am the field into which *it falls*; such is the common reality of experience” (Peck quoted in the preface, page 8). The individual is both the perceiver and the field of perception. For Peck, this is not solipsism. The field of perception with which the poem presents us is a shared dark history.

Peck's monumental poem leaves me with work to do. I have books to read, movies to see: the underground Soviet film *Andrei Rublev*, an exploration, among other things, of the role of the artist in an oppressive society; the opera *Billy Bud* composed by E. M. Forster and Benjamin Britten based upon Melville's novella (a late sequence of cantos in *The Bewitched Groom* focuses on the relationship between Billy Bud and Vere: the condemned and the judge locked in an intimate embrace, unconscious desire at the core of the relationship leading to death, recognition, and a kind of reversal); Tolstoy's posthumously published novella *Hadji Murad*, a critical exploration of the Russian empire's con-

quest of the Caucasus from the morally complicated view of one of the colonized. It sends me in these many directions not out of duty but out of raised curiosity. Having said this, I must also say the poem cries out for an annotated edition.

Peck's method is layered and associative, in the high modernist style. The historical person of the poet plays a key role in this disjunctive narrative. We have many references to Peck's father, Clarence Peck, who was engaged in the Manhattan project, developer of the external metallic alloy necessary for the functioning of the A-bomb (“the Bomb that Father sheathed,” *Caelum: marching-up country*, Canto 40), and to many of those associated with the project. Peck shares much in his historical and lyric “undersensing” with the poet Peter Dale Scott, whose *Coming to Jakarta: a Poem About Terror* combines the poet's experiences as the son of a Canadian diplomat and the hidden history of the extermination of half a million people in Indonesia, orchestrated in large part by the CIA. Both poets unveil buried connections between the individual, social context, and history. Both bring from hidden depths uncomfortable truths. Scott annotates his historical poems, giving us entry into the poetry. Peck asks us to do the work: in the words of “Yeshua Amadeus . . . *Enter into / nothing less than the whole with your all, and say, Glory*” (*Caelum* Canto 62). ●



**GREG MILLER** is a professor emeritus of English at Millsaps College. The University of Chicago Press published three of his collections of poetry. Miller's scholarly work includes two books on the Latin and Greek poetry of George Herbert, in collaboration with classicists Catherine and Richard Freis, his edition of Herbert's Latin letters and orations forthcoming.

# Tikkun Recommends

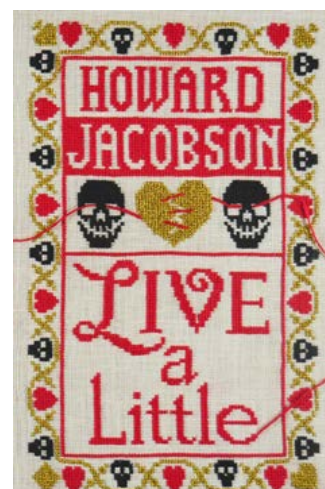
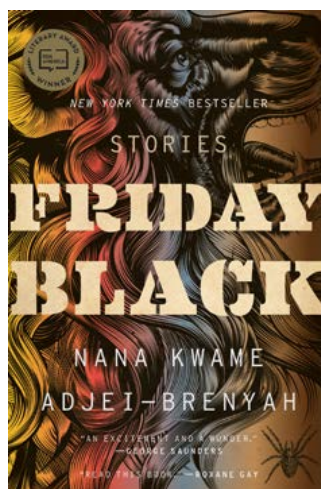
**Friday Black**  
**Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah**  
**Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018**

**Fly Already**  
**Etgar Keret**  
**Riverhead Books, 2019**

**Investigations of a Dog**  
**Franz Kafka (a new translation by Michael Hoffman)**  
**New Directions Publishing, 2017**

**Live a Little**  
**Howard Jacobson**  
**Hogarth/Random House, 2019**

We don't usually review short stories, but these books are so powerful we have decided to recommend them. Rarely have we encountered a powerful voice like that of Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah. This is not an African American seeking to convince the rest of us that we should be more sensitive to their oppression, but rather one who takes us live into the experience itself. In the first story of the book we hear the inner story of Emmanuel going to a job interview, and trying to reduce his blackness



while his friends were mourning the acquittal of a white man who had been indicted for cutting off the heads of five black children outside the Finkelstein Library in Valley Ridge, South Carolina. The court had ruled that because the children were basically "loitering and not actually active members of society, it was reasonable that the accused had

felt threatened by these five black young people and, thus, he was well within his rights when he protected himself, his library-loaned DVDs, his Ford F-150 and retrieving his Hawtech PRO eighteen inch 48cc chainsaw.” And this is just the beginning of yet another set of confrontations with racism that day, which ends with him dead. In another powerful story, Adjei-Brenyah takes us into the mind of a salesman at a mall on Black Friday during which customers rush into the store, ignoring that, in their frenetic desperation to get a “deal” and buy things, they are trampling over a child and then soon over each other.

In a totally different emotional range, Etgar Keret, one of Israel’s most acclaimed authors of fiction, takes us into the daily lives of Israelis. Here we barely notice the experience of Palestinians or others suffering in the midst of Israel’s attempt to make their state both democratic and just for Jews. What is most powerful is the sense of “regularness” in his stories, though each one has a bizarre twist. Many could have taken place anywhere in the world and yet most have a flavor of Israeli secular life. One reason to read Keret is because he opens us to an Israeli culture far from the Israel that has been presented by the conflict, by the romantic portrayals of life as ultra-orthodox or by brutal West Bank settlers. So when, in his title story, a young boy gets very agitated that a man standing on the rooftop of a tall building has not yet jumped, never even imagining that perhaps this man cannot fly like superheroes he has watched on TV or movies, and calls out “fly already,” his father decides to take him up to the roof to see if the man can be convinced not to jump.

Many readers of *Tikkun* will remember Franz Kafka’s *Investigations of a Dog* if for no other reason than that it did not have the dark forebodings of Kafka’s portrayal of totalitarianism in his two classic novels *The Trial* and *The Castle*. This new translation and collection of Kafka stories and very short essays, some only newly available in English, makes the reader wish we had the opportunity to spend an afternoon with this amazingly insightful and self-doubting thinker. Perhaps we might have been

able to pull him out of his depression? But perhaps Kafka foresaw the seeds of the coming Holocaust. Sadly, we might be entering our own Extinction without even having many authors, like Kafka, to give us a feel for what our coming disasters might be like. One reason *Investigation of a Dog* will continue to charm any reader who approaches this alleged inner consciousness of our canine friends is that it is resolutely cheery as the dog tries to figure out a human world that is as opaque to him as the consciousness of some of our pathological politicians are to us. Its humor will delight you.

Howard Jacobson’s novel *Live a Little* has a different and more familiar humor for those who have had the pleasure to read some of his earlier works, particularly *The Mighty Walzer* and his Man Booker Prize-winning *The Finkler Question*. The story in this latest book is a romance between two people in their nineties, one of whom forgets nothing, the other of whom is forgetting everything. The story is often funny and touching, but it deserves its place in *Tikkun* because it makes a powerful contribution to demystifying and perhaps, if widely read as it deserves to be, somewhat undermining the ageism which is the least mentioned but most widely experienced of all oppressions. Nowhere does the cruelty and absurdity of judging people useful only to the extent that they can contribute to the wealth or power of the capitalist elites or to their cultural pleasures than in the outrageous ways we treat our elders, discarding them as we might our recyclable rotten vegetables.

### **Welcome to the Revolution**

**Charles Derber**  
**Routledge, 2018**

### **Team Human**

**Douglas Rushkoff**  
**W.W. Norton, 2019**

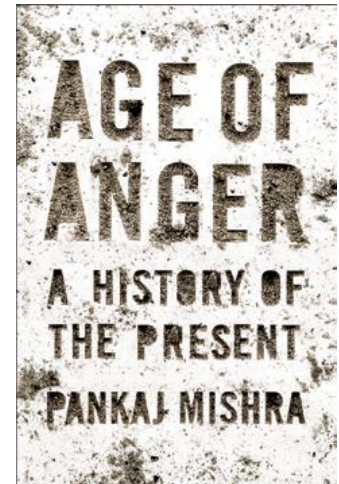
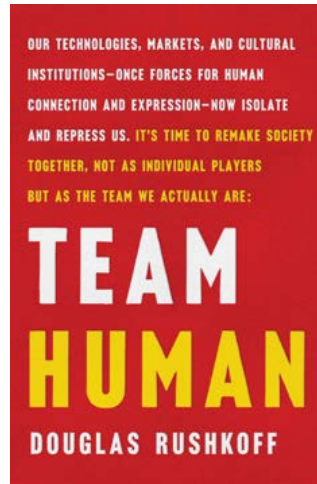
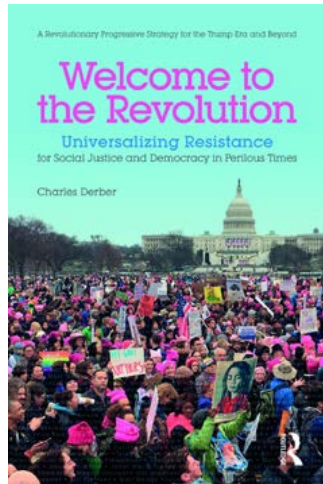
### **Age of Anger**

**Pankaj Mishra**  
**Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2017**

Here are three books that seek to make sense of the current political moment.

Charles Derber, a professor of sociology at Boston College, subtitles his *Welcome to the Revolution* this way: “Universalizing Resistance for Social Justice and Democracy in Perilous Times.” Derber manages to sum up and make accessible the shared wisdom and assumptions of many contemporary activists, often providing a more intellectually solid presentation of these ideas than you’ll find in the wide array of daily web magazines and blogs that feature these activists. Moreover, he intersperses his lucid presentation with what he calls “Interludes” from some of the most creative shapers of today’s social movements, including Noam Chomsky, Ben Manski, Chuck Collins, Medea Benjamin, Janet MacGillivray Wallace, Juliet B. Schor, Gar Alperovitz, Bill Fletcher, and Shelley White.

Douglas Rushkoff’s *Team Human* warns us that we cannot remake society as lone individual players—we can only do so as part of a larger movement which he calls a ‘team.’ This book is filled with chunks of wisdom worth absorbing. For example, “By disconnecting science from the broader systemwide realities of nature, human experience, and emotions, we rob it of its moral power. The problem is that we aren’t investing enough in scientific research or technological answers to our problems, but that we’re looking to science for answers that ultimately require human moral intervention.” And: “Money, debt, jobs, slavery, countries, race, corporations, stock markets, brands, religions, government, and taxes are all human inventions. We made them up, but we now act as if they’re unchangeable laws. Playing for Team Humanity means being capable of distinguishing between what we can’t change and what we can.”



In *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* Pankaj Mishra goes beyond normal political categories to address some of the psychological and spiritual dimensions that we at *Tikkun* have been highlighting and which emerged through the research of the Institute for Labor and Mental Health. Towards the end of this inquiry into the role of anger in politics, Mishra tells his readers: “In the neo-liberal fantasy of individualism, everyone was supposed to be an entrepreneur, retraining and repackaging themselves in a dynamic economy, perpetually alert to the latest technological revolutions. A heightened rhetoric of self-empowerment accompanied, for instance, the IT revolution, as young graduates and dropouts became billionaires overnight in the Bay Area, and users of Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp briefly appeared to be toppling authoritarian regimes worldwide. But the drivers of Uber cars, toiling for abysmally low fares, represent the actual fate of many self-employed ‘entrepreneurs.’ Capital continually moves across national boundaries in the search for profits, contemptuously sweeping skills and norms made obsolete by technology into the dustbin of history. We may pretend to be entrepreneurs, polishing our personal brands, decorating our stalls in virtual as well as real marketplaces; but defeat, humiliation, and resentment are more commonplace experiences than success and contentment in the strenuous endeavor of franchising the individual self.”

***In This Hour***

**Abraham Joshua Heschel**

**Jewish Publication Society, 2019**

***Herbert Marcuse: Philosopher of Utopia***

**Nick Thorkelson, ed. by Paul Buhle and Andrew T. Lamas**

**City Lights Books, 2019**

***Walter Kaufmann: Philosopher, Humanist, Heretic***

**Stanley Corngold**

**Princeton U. Press, 2019**

***Almost Everything: Notes on Hope***

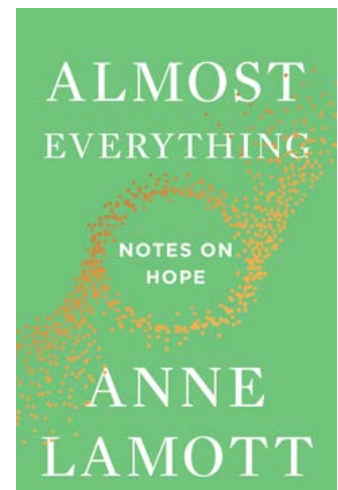
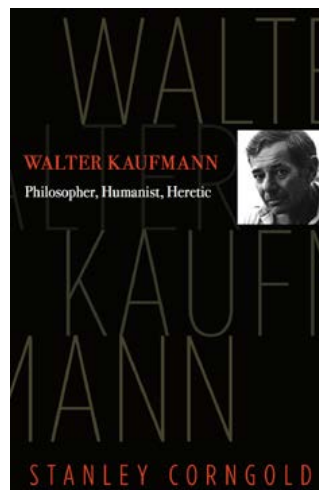
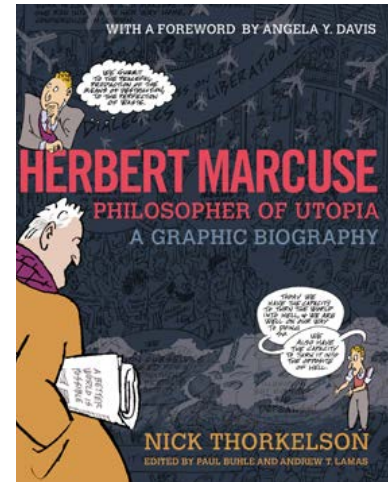
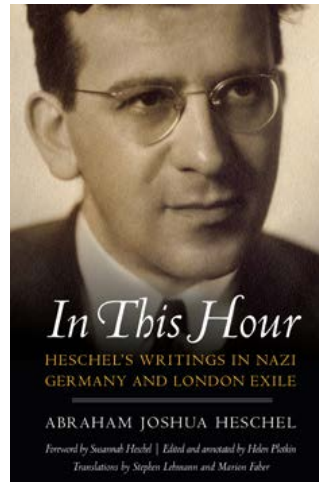
**Anne Lamott**

**Riverhead/Penguin Random House, 2018**

***Ageless Soul***

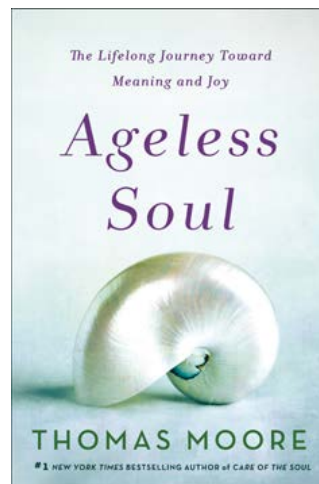
**Thomas Moore**

**St. Martin's Press, 2017**



There are several books that deepen our philosophical and/or spiritual wisdom.

*In This Hour* is a selection of Abraham Joshua Heschel's writings in Nazi Germany and London exile before coming to the U.S. It is translated for the first time in English by Stephen Lehmann and Marion Faber, edited and annotated by Helene Plotkin, with a foreword from Susannah Heschel. It includes some important insights that the post-Holocaust Jewish world, and many identity politics activists, ought to take to heart. "Suffering," Heschel tells us in an article only recently rediscovered by Susannah Heschel, "confers neither a patent of nobility nor an obligation to purify oneself... The task given to the suffering person is to direct himself to suffering people, to see them in the fire of his own suffering, to see for others, both near and distant. Suffering breaks the circle of egotism in which our heart has been confined. The rev-



elation of the Other is granted us... Slipping on this steep and narrow path of suffering is a constant danger. We will be misled by vanity, by a feeling of hatred... The self becomes frozen in resentment. Instead of ascending the path, it allows itself to be seduced by a feeling of powerlessness and plummets into darkness. Instead of peace with the world, there arises discord with the universe." And this is only one hint of the wisdom you'll find in this book.

How we wish that Heschel and Marcuse had known each other in Germany. While the wisdom

in Marcuse's thinking can be found most profoundly in his *One Dimensional Man* and in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, an easier introduction to his life and thought is presented in the new graphic biography by Nick Thorkelson, and hopefully might entice a new generation of activists to read his many powerful books. Though this graphic work might be mistaken for a light and superficial way to encounter Marcuse, it is actually filled with insights about the struggle for liberation.

*Walter Kaufmann: Philosopher, Humanist, Heretic* is a full-fledged biography of one of the more provocative academic philosophers of mid and late 20<sup>th</sup> century academia. Stanley Corngold does an excellent job of capturing Kaufmann's philosophical nuances and his powerful sense of humor. Corngold doesn't shrink from pointing out Kaufmann's inconsistencies and provides his own philosophical insights. Visionaries are not likely to feel at home in academic departments, and Kaufmann often broke the conventions of his profession. Yet for many who have been deeply disappointed by the narrowness of Anglo-American philosophy, its distance from a serious search for (much less love of) wisdom, Kaufmann's life and thought provide a welcome foundation for rediscovering what is valuable in the Western tradition, despite its largely misguided self-importance and ignorance of the kind of spiritual liberation offered by Heschel or political liberation championed by Marcuse.

Anne Lamott has been an indefatigable source of wisdom, drawn from her Christian roots yet universal in its applicability to daily life. So *Almost Everything* with its "notes on hope" is most deeply needed at a time when the evil emanating from the Trump Administration has sent many into deep despair about the world. Almost every one of its well-crafted 189 pages contains nuggets of insight about daily life, spiritual reality, and our capacity to regenerate amazement at life. She has the rare ability to reveal her moments of doubt and weakness without pride or celebration of how, at times, she is able to see the beauty in herself and others. "Empathy begins when we realize how much alike we all are." This realization becomes for her a springboard to reducing self-hatred as well as

our tendency to see ourselves as better than others. And Lamott has tips on the path to transcendence. "Your inside person does not have an age. It is all the ages you have ever been and the age you are at this very moment. As soon as you get used to being some extremely advanced age that you used to think of as ancient and hoary, you will get even older, God willing." And then there are the words, almost identical to what is said at the beginning of High Holiday services at Beyt Tikkun in Berkeley: "The God with whom you are having problems, or whom you hate or ridicule, is not the God we are talking about. When we talk about goodness, an animating intelligence in the universe and in our hearts or a pervasive unity or presence, we are not talking about an old bearded guy in the sky...we are talking about a kindness, patience, a hope which is everywhere, even in our annoying self-centered, fraudulent selves."

And speaking of aging, we want to recommend a book from two years ago that is likely to be relevant to anyone approaching the age where there is likely more years behind them than ahead. Thomas Moore, famous for his book *Care of the Soul*, published *Ageless Soul* in 2017, and it is likely to be just as relevant decades from now. While Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* remains a classic encounter with the issues all of us are likely to face at one point or another in our lives, *Ageless Soul* brings us the insights of a practicing psychotherapist whose emphasis on living a full life with purpose provides another important angle that is essential in helping us counter the depressive reaction to aging that has recently intensified as some people mourn leaving life at a time when the forces of reactionary nationalism have been making a huge impact. Many wish they could live to see clearly the signs of a potential liberation of our world from hateful forces, yet despair that evil may continue to shape national policies. Moore and Schachter-Shalomi both are champions of a more hopeful way of thinking about our lives and our deaths.

# TRUMP SAYS “AMERICA FIRST”



## WE SAY “LOVE, GENEROSITY, AND HUMANITY FIRST!”

American values have been an arena of contention since the U.S. was formed. There have always been those who saw the U.S. as a country in which white men and their families, escaping from religious persecution in Europe, could create a white Christian society here.

But there have been others who believed and fought for an America that would welcome the stranger, the refugee, and all those who were in need of a safe haven.

No wonder that they rallied around the vision of the poem by Jewish poet Emma Lazarus inscribed on the Statue of Liberty—which she described as “Mother of Exiles.” Her vision, rooted in the aspirations not only of Jews but of refugees from around the world and Biblical values embraced by many Americans, had the Statue of Liberty proclaim:

**Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!**

The Torah explicitly urges us to “Love the Stranger/the Other.” There is a strand in every religion and secular humanism that affirms this call to care for the homeless, the poor, and the refugee. It is the America expressed by this vision that we, the readers of Tikkun Magazine and the Network of Spiritual Progressives, support. The best way to protect and care for America is to care for and share what we have with all people on this planet and care for the Earth itself!

**Read our full vision at:  
[www.tikkun.org/covenant](http://www.tikkun.org/covenant)**



**The Network of  
Spiritual Progressives**  
*A Path to a World of Love and Justice*

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# Tikkun תיקון

*Tikkun* . . . to heal, repair and transform the world.

All the rest is commentary.



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